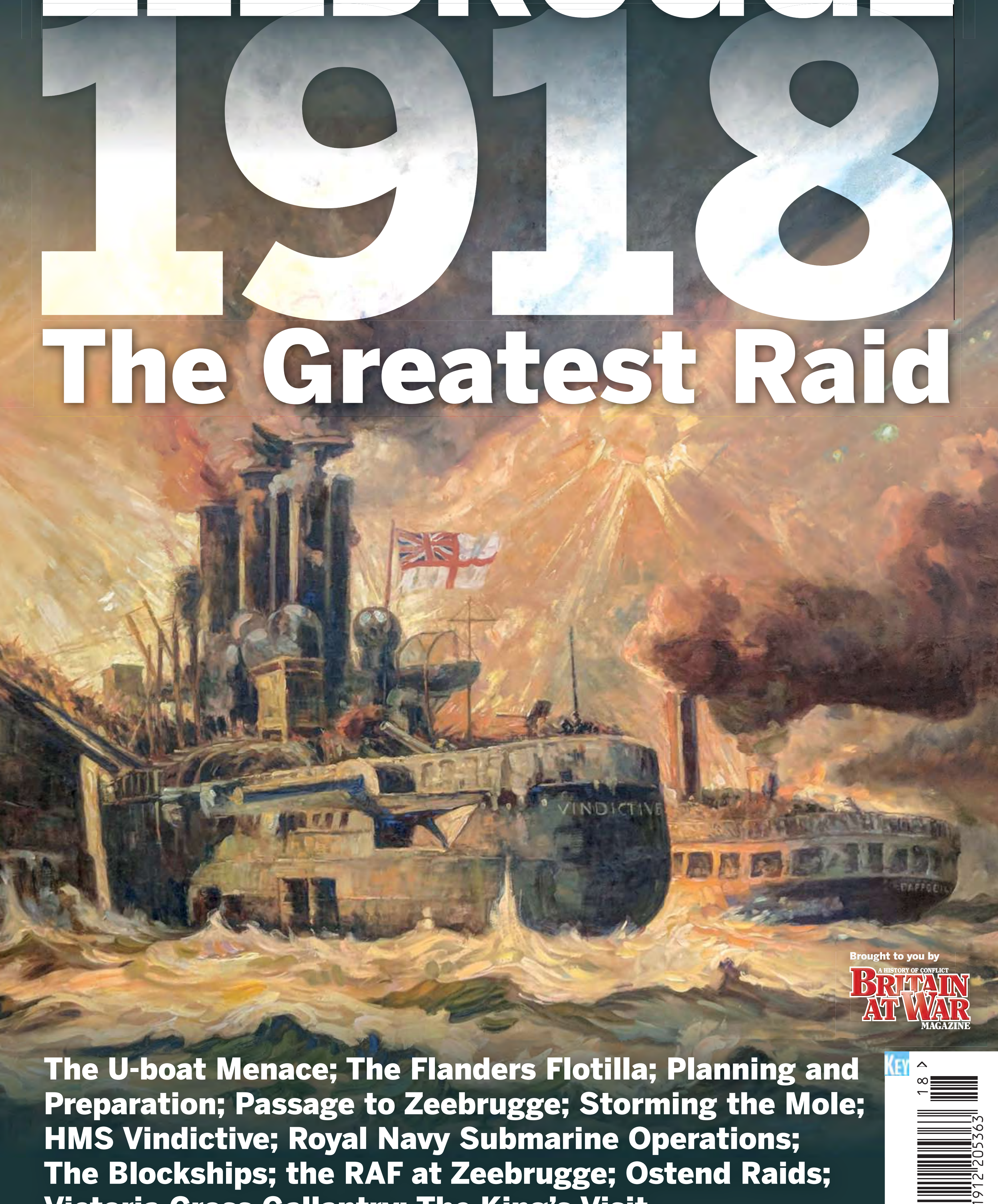
ZEEBRUGGE 1918

The Greatest Raid



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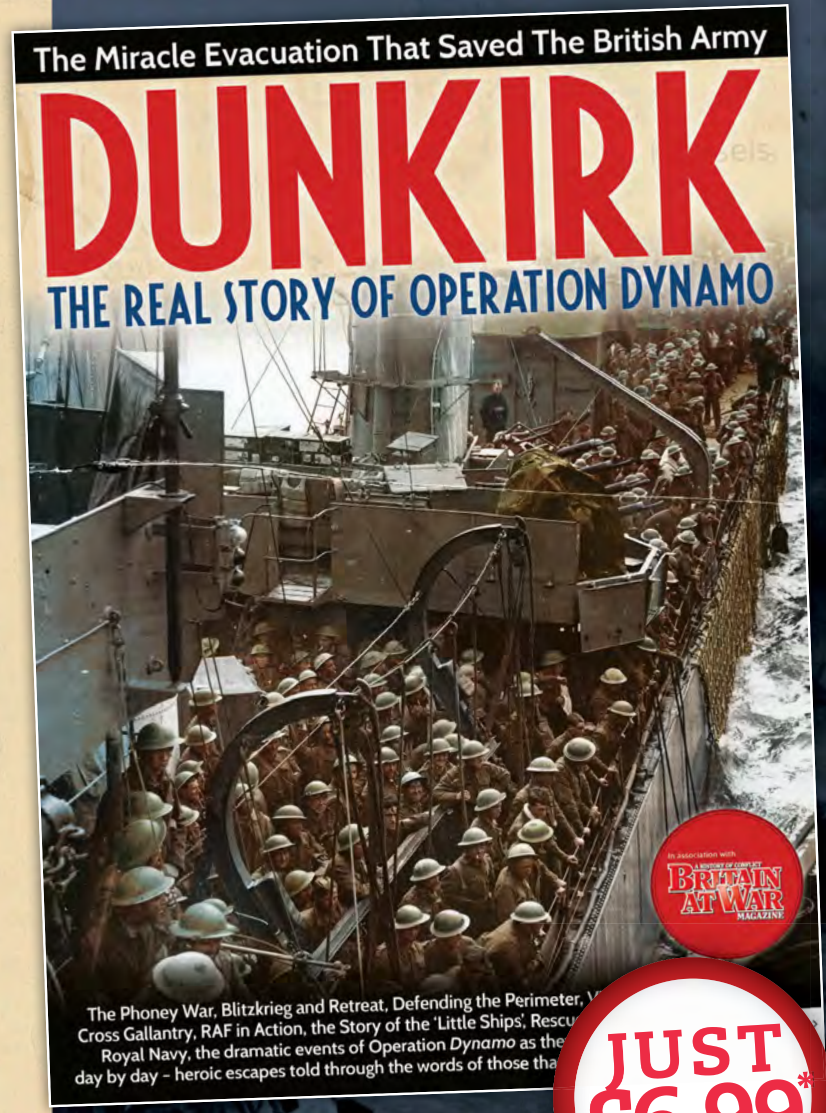
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Zeebrugge 1918

The Greatest Raid

The amphibious assault upon the German-held Belgian port of Zeebrugge by the Royal Navy on 23 April 1918 was not a resounding success, despite considerable efforts in its preparation and heavy casualties in its execution. Though the movements of the German submarines using Zeebrugge as a base for their attacks upon Allied shipping were temporarily restricted, the raid had a negligible effect on the outcome of the First World War. But it was a daring and bold strike which raised the flagging, war-weary morale of the British nation. Coupled with the corresponding attack upon Ostend on 9 May which partially blocked the harbour entrance, it demonstrated to the enemy that nowhere was safe from the long reach of the Royal Navy. Britannia still ruled the waves.

The Zeebrugge and Ostend raids resulted in a wide distribution of awards, including eight Victoria Crosses, twenty-one Distinguished Service Orders, thirty-one Distinguished Service Crosses, sixteen Conspicuous Gallantry Medals and 149 Distinguished Service Medals. This was a remarkable haul for the comparatively small number of men directly involved in the fighting in Zeebrugge, but it signified the intensity of the battle in the close confines of the harbour.

The assault on Zeebrugge exemplified the detailed planning so typical of the Senior Service and the unflinching courage of its officers and men. It is through the words of those men that we can relive the horror and the drama of the desperate battle in the dark, as they manoeuvred their ships into point-blank artillery fire, and stumbled ashore to engage the enemy in a vicious close-quarter struggle.

There is no doubt, this was the greatest raid.

John Grehan

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During an official visit to the former battlefields of the Western Front, King George V observes the wrecks of the blockships *Intrepid* and *Iphigenia* at Zeebrugge, 9 December 1918. (Paul Kendall Collection)

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The editorial team would like to thank Paul Kendall (**www.paul-kendall.co.uk**) for allowing access to his extensive archive relating to the Zeebrugge and Ostend raids, both in terms of primary source material and images; Robert Mitchell for his unstinting help on the pictures; Zeebrugge councillor Jean-Marie De Planke for his informative tour of the Zeebrugge sites; and Kapitein Joris Praet, Havenkapitein-Commandant Zeebrugge, for guiding us around the port and sharing his knowledge of its involvement in the St George's Day raid.

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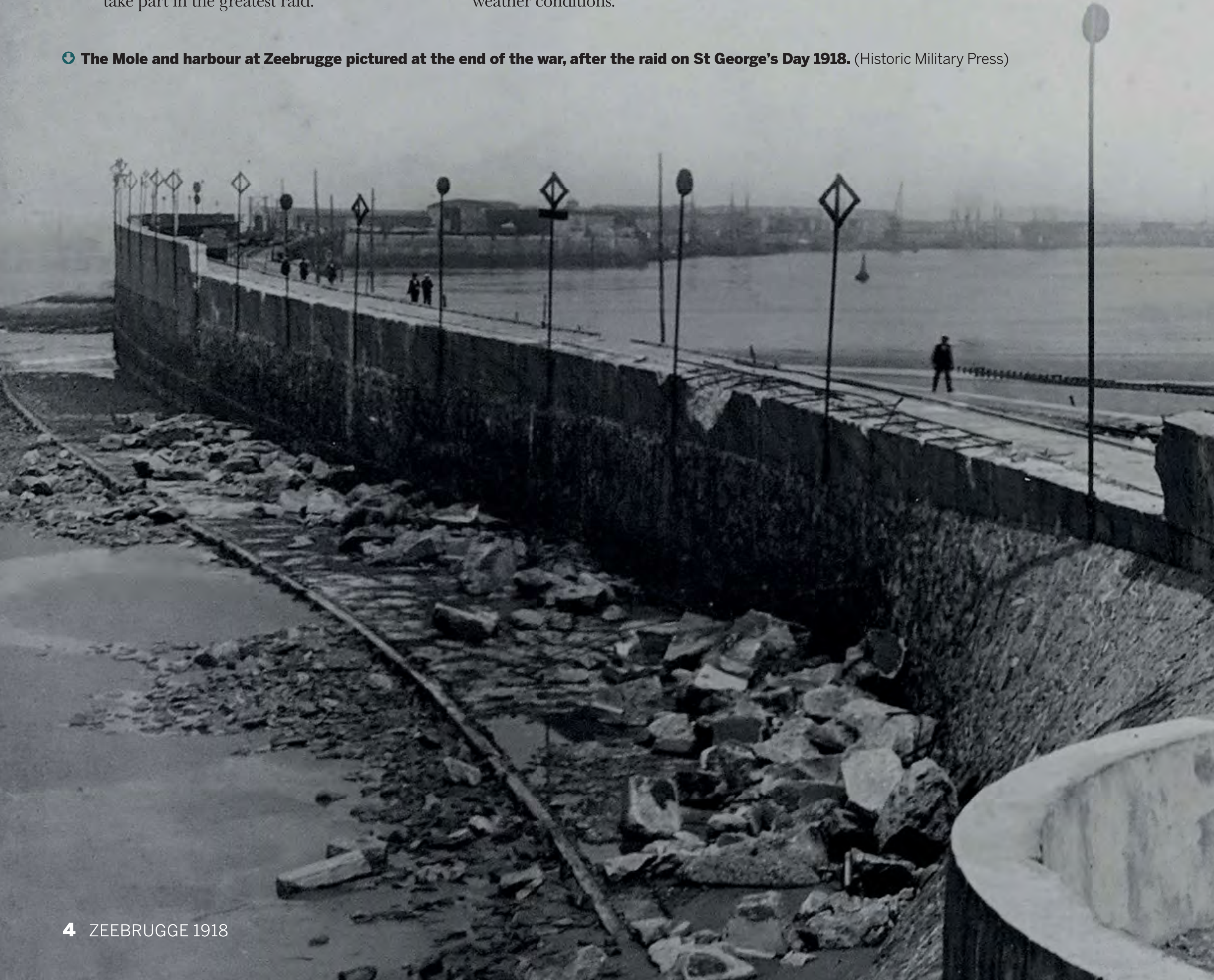
It was next the turn of the submarines to rush as fast as possible round the outside of the Mole and crash into the viaduct.

The Mole and harbour at Zeebrugge pictured at the end of the war, after the raid on St George's Day 1918. (Historic Military Press)



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HMS *Vindictive* at Dover showing 'her battle scars' after the raid on 23 April 1918. (Paul Kendall Collection)

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To what extent the raids upon Zeebrugge and Ostend succeeded in blocking the Bruges Canal remains unclear in the face of conflicting evidence. But there can be no question that the attacks boosted flagging British morale.

The Flanders Flotilla

Throughout the war, German vessels had posed a threat to Allied shipping in home waters, but with the introduction of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917, shipping losses began to reach critical levels. If Britain was not to be starved into surrender, something had to be done. What was envisaged was the most daring raid of the First World War.

The German submarine pens at Bruges, one of the reasons why the Zeebrugge Raid was planned and executed. (Historic Military Press)

The rapid German advance into Belgium at the start of the First World War saw enemy forces occupy a large proportion of the Belgian coast, including the ports of Ostend and Zeebrugge which were linked by canal to the inland port of Bruges. For much of its recent history, Britain has been dependent on food imports to feed its population, and the occupation of these ports gave the Imperial German Navy, the *Kaiserliche Marine*, the opportunity to strike a telling blow at British shipping.

As early as 23 December 1914, German intentions started to become apparent. In a statement made that day by Grand Admiral Alfred Peter von Tirpitz, Secretary of State of the German Imperial Navy Office, it was announced that submarines would be used against British merchant ships in a bid to blockade ports around the UK. In the statement, which was released through a semi-official newspaper, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, von Tirpitz said that submarines would be more effective than airships at sinking ships. The paper also reported that the German Admiral's statement was 'highly important' and that 'the German public knew well that Germany would have a reply ready to the question how the Germans ought to attack England's nerve centre'.

The paper's editorial continued by stating, 'We occupy Ostend, and mean to hold it as a base, and when our Admiralty considers the moment has arrived, we will carry on the blockade war with determination and ruthlessness'.

Inevitably the British press gave its response to the announcement. The *Daily Express* wrote that: 'What is intended is raids on the English coast by German submarines searching for British merchant vessels. From now on German submarines are going to renew their activity, and hope to be able to crawl as far as the Straits of Dover, and pass northwards to the coasts of Ireland. There they think they will torpedo and sink many vessels bringing supplies of foodstuffs and raw materials into Great Britain.'

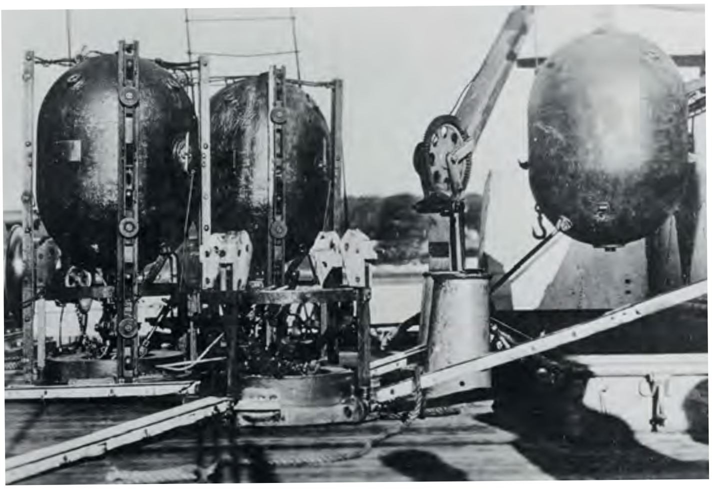
A portrait of Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 134-C1743/CC-BY-SA)

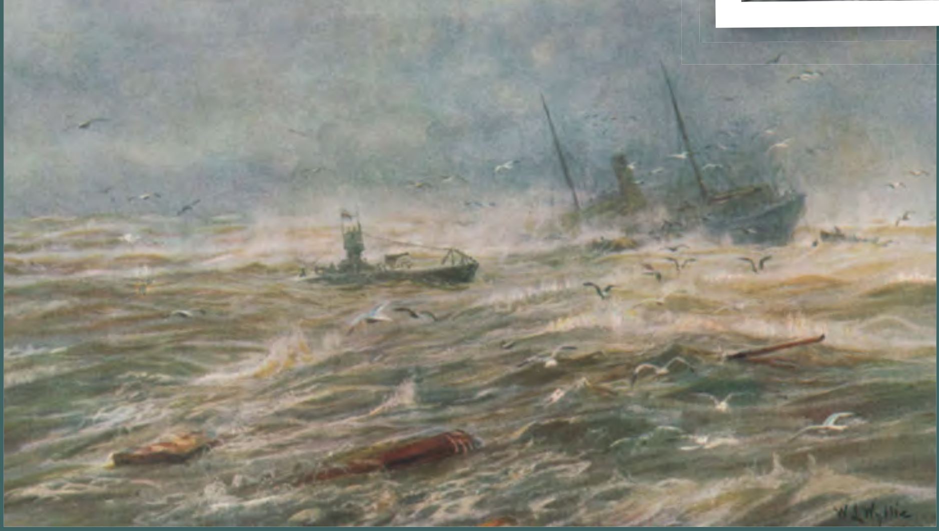
Women and children wait in a bread line in Britain during the First World War. Though formal rationing was not introduced until 1918, food shortages had been an ever-present factor of life on the Home Front from the very start of the war. Initially caused by panic buying in the summer of 1914, such shortages continued. In April 1916, for example, Britain only had six weeks of wheat left, a desperate problem when it is considered that bread was a staple part of most people's diets. The problems were greatly exacerbated by Germany's policy of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917 and 1918. (US Library of Congress)

A number of papers drew parallels with the comments of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who, the previous August in an article entitled 'Danger' published in *Collier's Weekly*, had been the first person to suggest that, in the event of war, Britain 'might be starved into submission by the obstruction of her mercantile fleet and by the destruction and withholding of food supplies from this country'.

The New York *Tribune* commented on von Tirpitz's announcement with the following observation: 'There is only one trouble about Admiral von Tirpitz's proposed marvellous achievement, and that is its impossibility as long as the present naval conditions prevail.'

The types of German sea mines that were carried by the UC-class mine-laying U-boats of the Flanders Flotilla. These were recovered from the wreck of *UC-44*, which was not a Bruges-based submarine, after it was sunk, by the detonation of one of its own mines, at Waterford, Ireland, in 1917. (Naval History and Heritage Command)





A painting by William Lionel Wyllie which depicts a surfaced U-boat sinking an Allied merchant ship during the First World War. (Historic Military Press)

Von Tirpitz's comments were followed, on 15 February 1915, by an announcement made by the German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg. He stated: 'The waters around Great Britain and Ireland, including the whole of the English Channel, are herewith declared to be in the War Zone. From 18 February onward, every merchant ship met with in this War Zone will be destroyed. Nor will it always be possible to obviate the danger with which passengers and crew are thereby threatened.

'Neutral ships, too, will run a risk in the War Zone,' he continued, 'and owing to the hazards of naval warfare, it may not always be possible to prevent the attacks meant for hostile ships from being directed against neutral ships'.

The first attacks on British merchant ships had begun as early as October 1914, but there was no systematic approach taken by the Germans, and in the five months until February 1915 only nineteen ships had been sunk. The adoption of so-called 'unrestricted' submarine warfare following Bethmann-Hollweg's announcement, however, saw a major effort by the Germans.

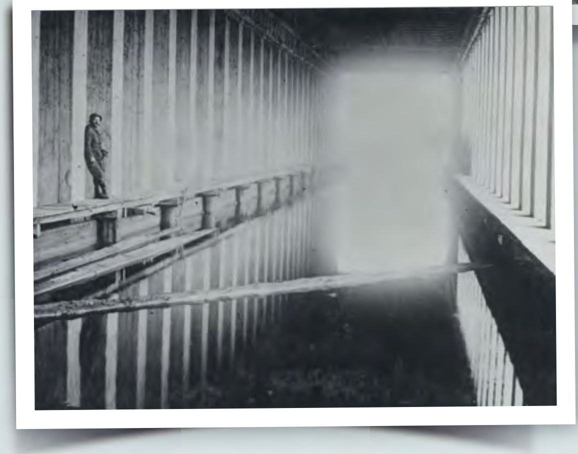
Following this announcement, the *Unterseebooteflotille Flandern* was formally established at Bruges on 29 March 1915. By September that year, no less than seventeen U-boats were based in the Belgian port. Not only could they attack the cross-Channel shipping, but they were far nearer the hunting grounds for Atlantic shipping heading towards Britain. *Korvettenkapitän* Karl Bartenbach was appointed commander of the Flanders Flotilla on 1 October 1915, with, initially, submarines of the UB-class, which were fitted with two 45cm (18-inch) torpedo tubes. They were supplemented from May 1915 by the UC-class of minelayers, each of which carried six pairs of mines in vertical tubes. *UB-2* was the only one to sail to Zeebrugge; all the rest were prefabricated, in about fifteen major pieces, and transported on eight railway wagons. Assembly took two to three weeks, and the whole process from Germany to the sea took six weeks.

In addition to the U-boats, Zeebrugge, Ostend and Bruges itself were also home to smaller surface craft – various forms of torpedo- and gun-boats, up to small destroyers. These, however, were always going to be outgunned by Allied warships, but just occasionally German surface vessels did venture out, such as on the night of 26/27 October 1916, when they caught the Royal Navy by surprise and sank a few ships including the 330-ton destroyer HMS *Flirt*.

However, the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania* with American nationals onboard, led to the threat of the United States declaring war on Germany, and the demand that unrestricted submarine warfare cease. Germany complied.

As the war progressed, it became increasingly obvious in Berlin that Germany could not win, and, risking war with America, decided to reintroduce unrestricted submarine warfare on 1 February 1918, in a bid to starve the UK into seeking terms that would bring the war to a satisfactory conclusion.

In 1916, the *Kaiserliche Marine* sank 2,327,326 tons of shipping. Following the reintroduction of unrestricted submarine warfare, that figure rose to 6,235,878 for the year 1917. If this trend continued, the situation might indeed become critical in the UK. Something had to be done.



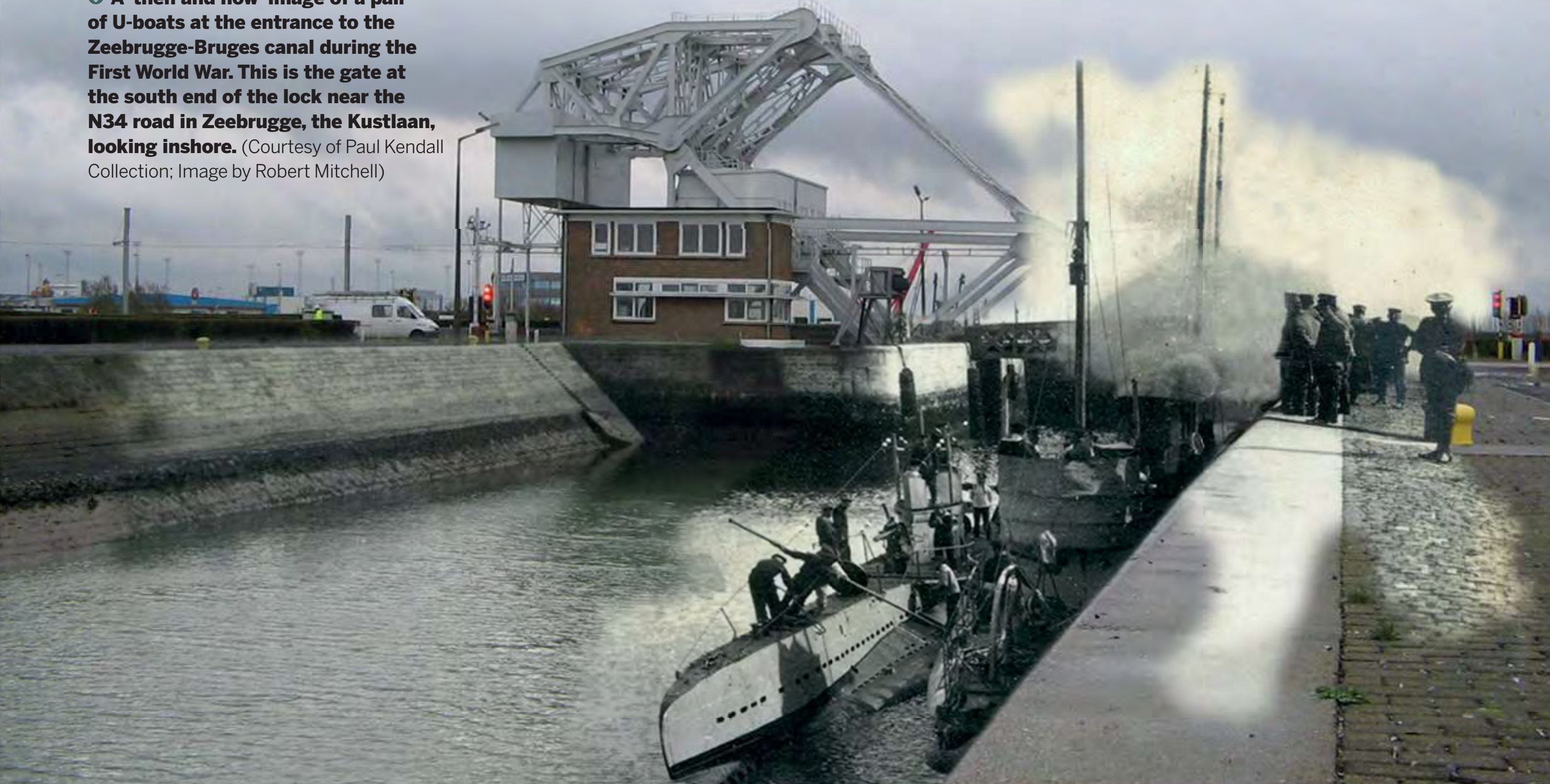
The view inside one of the pens at the U-boat shelters at Bruges. (USNHHC)

Another view of the concrete U-boat shelters at Bruges. (USNHHC)

THE PLAN

As early as January 1917, plans to block the German naval base at Bruges were considered by Commodore Reginald Tyrwhitt, commander of the Harwich Naval Force. Tyrwhitt duly submitted a proposal to destroy the lock gates at Zeebrugge, in an attack that would be covered by a naval bombardment, to Vice-Admiral Reginald Bacon, commander of the Dover Patrol. This proposal was rejected in favour of Bacon's own plan to use coastal motor boats to fire torpedoes at the lock gates. However, this operation, in turn, was never implemented and Tyrwhitt submitted another suggestion on 7 May 1917. This time it was a scheme to capture the Zeebrugge Mole and the lock gates. Much grander in scale, this assault would then lead to the port being used as a launch pad for an attack against Antwerp, an offensive which would threaten the German northern flank on the Western Front. As with those that went before it, this was also a plan that would never be implemented.

In December 1917, Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss was appointed First Sea Lord. He encouraged Vice-Admiral Roger Keyes, Director of the Plans Division at the



A 'then and now' image of a pair of U-boats at the entrance to the Zeebrugge-Bruges canal during the First World War. This is the gate at the south end of the lock near the N34 road in Zeebrugge, the Kustlaan, looking inshore. (Courtesy of Paul Kendall Collection; Image by Robert Mitchell)

A stretch of the Zeebrugge-Bruges canal as it appears today. This photograph was taken from the canal's east bank, looking north, a short distance north of the port area in Bruges. (Historic Military Press)

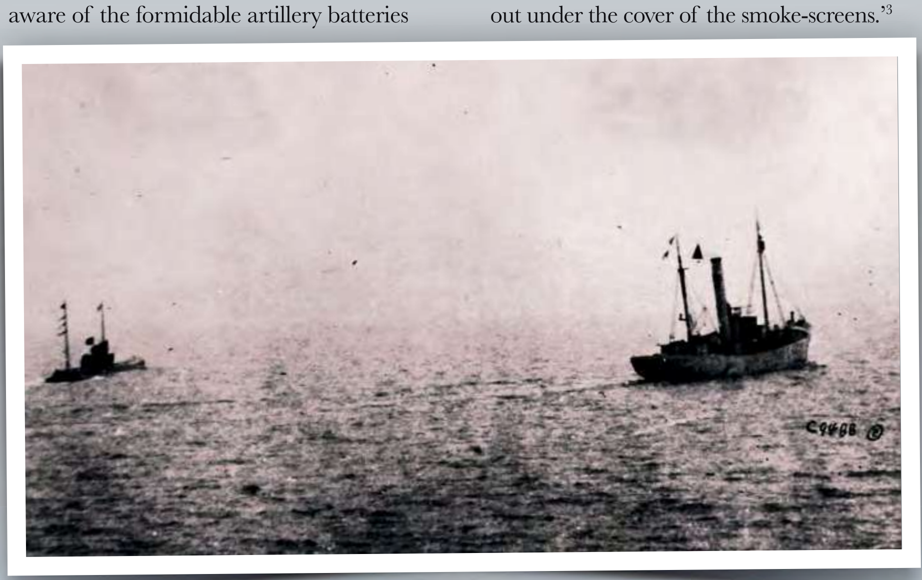
The area of Bruges Docks in which the U-boat shelters at Bruges were constructed as it appears today. No part of the concrete pens has survived. (Historic Military Press)

Admiralty, to reconsider the possibility of blocking the access points for those U-boats of the Flanders Flotilla using the naval base at Bruges. Keyes himself later recalled the following: 'On the 3rd December, the Staff appreciation and an outline of the plan was completed. It was believed that 18 destroyers and torpedo-boats, and 38 submarines, were based on Bruges, Zeebrugge and Ostend, and could pass between those ports, by way of the inland canals via Bruges. Thus there were was a good case for blocking the entrances to the Bruges Canal at Zeebrugge and Ostend.

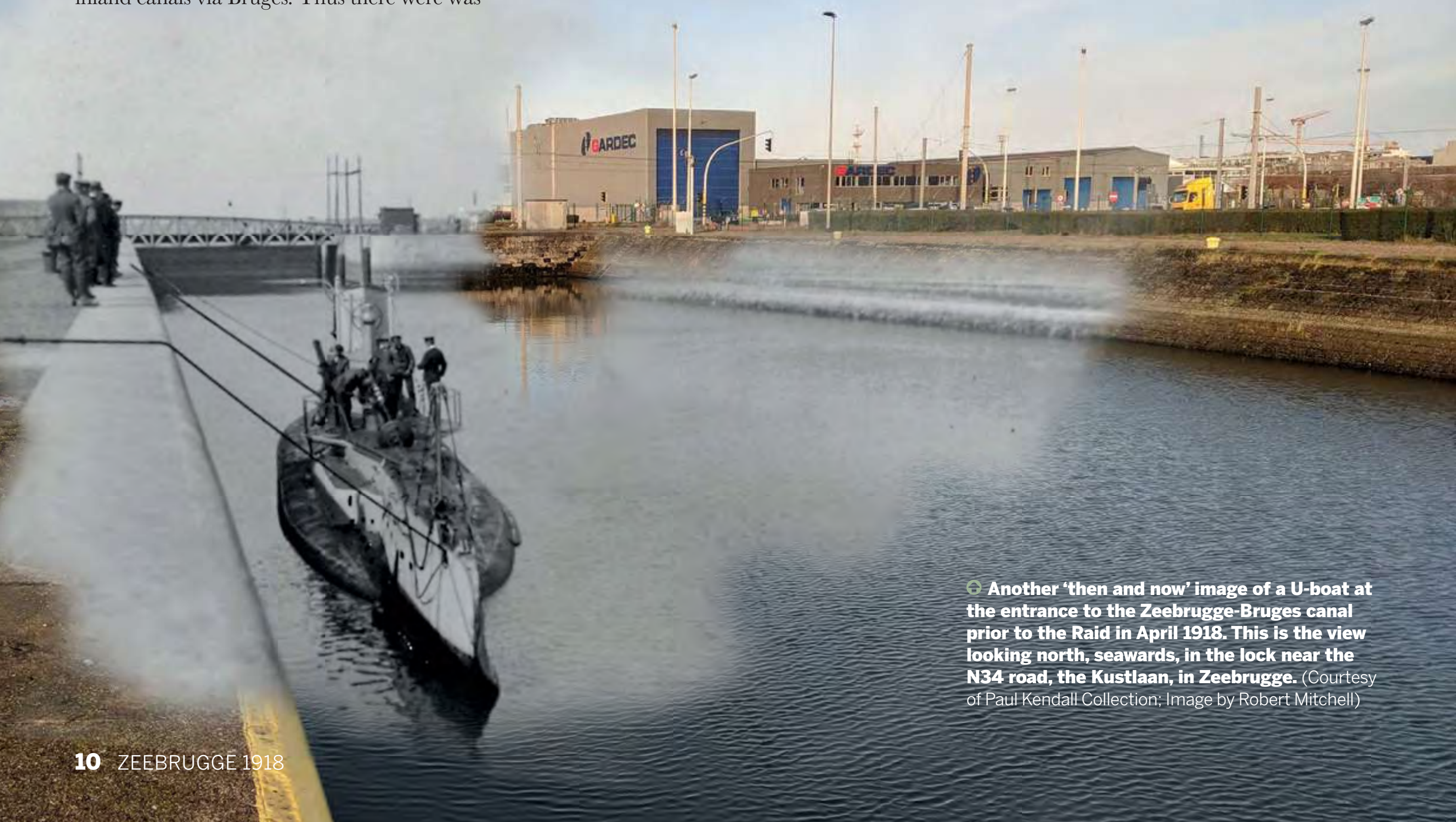
'It was thought that the small submarines could be transported to Antwerp on barges, via the canals through Bruges and Ghent, but if the suggested blocking operation was to be carried out, a number of valuable vessels would be lost to the enemy, so long as the harbours remained closed. The destroyers based on Bruges and Zeebrugge were a continual menace to our shipping in the Downs, and our patrol craft in the Dover Straits. The removal of this menace would release many of our destroyers at Dover which would then be able to take a more active part in anti-submarine work.'[1]

Keyes discussed the suggestions for an attack with Captain Alfred Pound[2]. As the pair was aware of the formidable artillery batteries that defended Zeebrugge they agreed that there was a possibility that many, if not all, of the participating vessels might be sunk before they even reached the Belgian coast. The only chance the attacking vessels might have of entering Zeebrugge would be if a heavy smoke-screen could be laid.

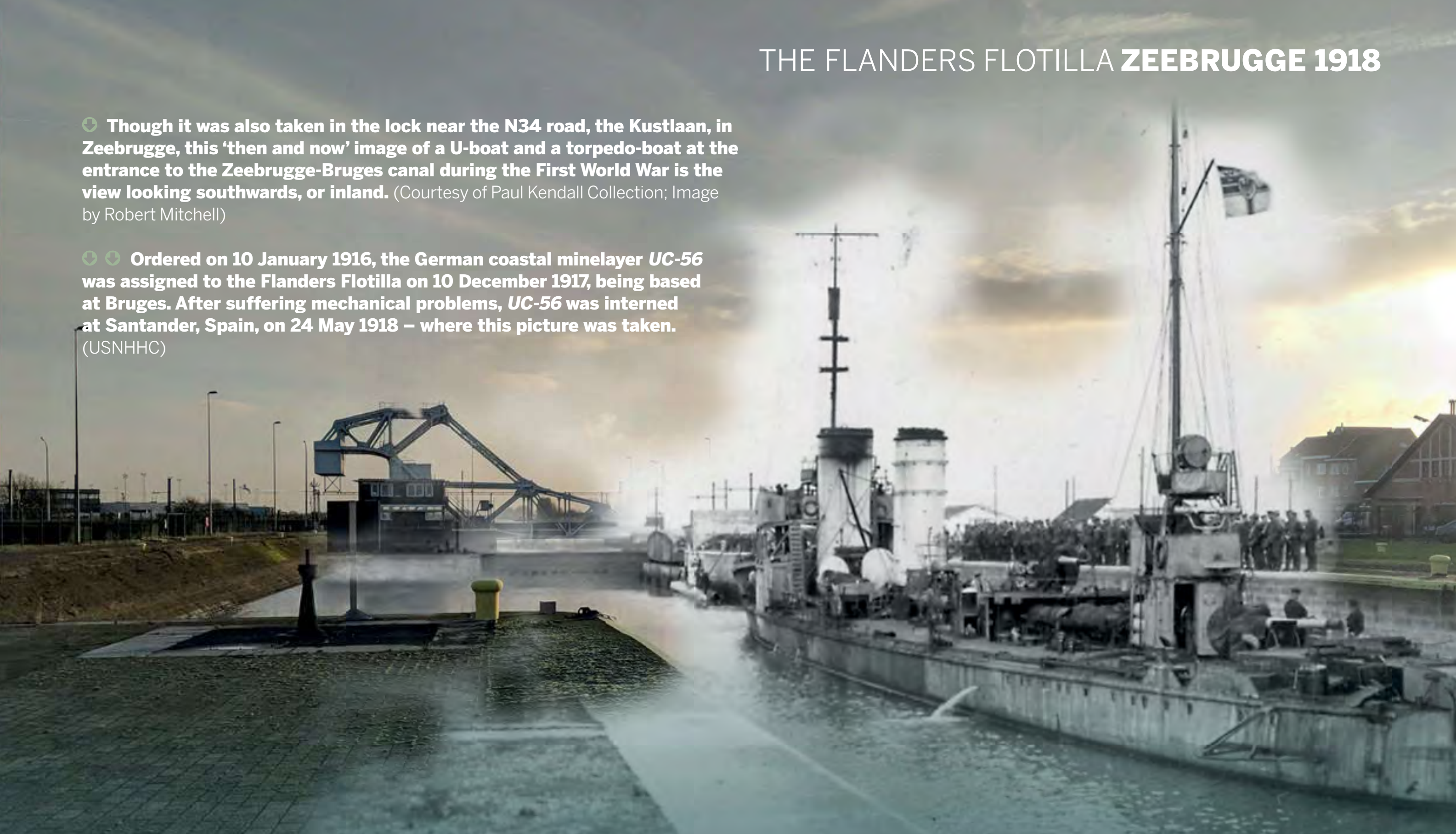
'Pound and I had again studied the plans of the defences of Zeebrugge and Ostend,' continued Keyes, 'with a view to blocking the Bruges Canal at Zeebrugge, and the entrance to Ostend harbour. I must confess that I thought the approach would be rather a formidable proposition, through waters commanded by over 20 heavy guns. However, he suggested that the use of smoke had been developed to such an extent, that the operation might be carried out under the cover of the smoke-screens.'[3]



The German submarine *U-36*, with its tender *W2* leading the way, is pictured passing through the defensive minefields into Zeebrugge during the First World War. Part of the Flanders Flotilla, *U-36* captured the US merchant ship SS *Pass of Balmaha* on 24 July 1915, though she was later sunk that day by British Q-ship *Prince Charles*. (USNHHC)



Another 'then and now' image of a U-boat at the entrance to the Zeebrugge-Bruges canal prior to the Raid in April 1918. This is the view looking north, seawards, in the lock near the N34 road, the Kustlaan, in Zeebrugge. (Courtesy of Paul Kendall Collection; Image by Robert Mitchell)



Though it was also taken in the lock near the N34 road, the Kustlaan, in Zeebrugge, this 'then and now' image of a U-boat and a torpedo-boat at the entrance to the Zeebrugge-Bruges canal during the First World War is the view looking southwards, or inland. (Courtesy of Paul Kendall Collection; Image by Robert Mitchell)

With this in mind, on 3 December 1917, Keyes submitted his plan to Vice-Admiral Bacon, though Bacon never forwarded it to Admiral Wemyss. But towards the end of 1917 German submarines were entering the Dover Strait at a worrying rate. Consequently, on 1 January 1918, Keyes was appointed commander of the Dover Patrol and was given complete authority to create a plan to block the U-boats and destroyers of the Flanders Flotilla based at Bruges. Keyes, therefore, began planning for what would become known as the 'greatest raid'.

Ordered on 10 January 1916, the German coastal minelayer *UC-56* was assigned to the Flanders Flotilla on 10 December 1917, being based at Bruges. After suffering mechanical problems, *UC-56* was interned at Santander, Spain, on 24 May 1918 – where this picture was taken. (USNHHC)

On 24 February 1918, Keyes presented his ideas for blocking Zeebrugge to the Admiralty. In Keyes' plan, three obsolete Royal Navy cruisers were to be used to block the entrance to the Bruges Canal. One of the three blockships would ram the lock gate at Zeebrugge, while the other two would be sunk in a V-shape across the mouth of the canal entrance, completely blocking the U-boat and destroyer entrance to the Bruges Canal. Before the blockships arrived, smoke screens would be launched from coastal motor boats, whilst a diversionary assault would be carried out on the Mole at Zeebrugge by Royal Marines and Royal Navy landing parties carried aboard assault ships. The men would be ordered to destroy the Mole battery and damage any vessels berthed alongside. To prevent reinforcements from reaching the Mole, a submarine filled with explosives would be rammed into the viaduct that connected it to the shore. Once the blockships had been scuttled, the assault force would be evacuated.

Just blocking the Bruges Canal at Zeebrugge would not be sufficient, however, as the German vessels would still be able to reach the sea along a canal from Bruges that exited into the North Sea through the smaller port of Ostend. So, a second operation had to be undertaken in conjunction with the raid upon Zeebrugge to close off this port. For this, there would be no need for any landing parties. All that Keyes envisaged was that two obsolete cruisers, which having been stripped to essential fittings and their lower holds and ballast filled with rubble and concrete, would be sunk across the canal exit. Ostend was defended by a powerful coastal battery and so monitors would stand off the coast and bombard the shore, while the two blockships rushed into the harbour under cover of a smoke screen.

For the twin raids to succeed, surprise was the key element. This meant absolute secrecy throughout the planning and preparation stages. Despite the relative haste required, this was achieved. ◉

NOTES:

1. Sir Roger Keyes, *The Naval Memoirs of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes 1916-1918* (Thornton Butterworth Ltd, London, 1935), p.240.
2. Later Admiral of the Fleet Sir Alfred Dudley Pickman Rogers Pound GCB, OM, GCVO. Having commanded HMS *Colossus* during the Battle of Jutland, Pound returned to a staff post at the Admiralty in July 1917, becoming Assistant Director of Plans and then Director of the Operations Division (Home). Pound was therefore closely involved in the planning for the Zeebrugge Raid.
3. Sir Roger Keyes, p.240.

A former Flanders Flotilla U-boat, *UB-88*, pictured following its surrender at the end of the First World War. Laid down at Hamburg in February 1917, and commissioned in January the following year, *UB-88* was immediately assigned to the *Unterseebooteflotille Flandern*, or Flanders Flotilla, having also completed shakedown cruises in the North and Baltic seas. Following its surrender at Harwich in November 1918, *UB-88* was handed over the US Navy. (USNHHC)

A Secret Mission

It was absolutely vital that the enemy learnt nothing of the proposed operation and extraordinary measures were undertaken to keep all the plans and preparations secret. Even the men who would form the crews and landing parties were told nothing more than it would be a secret mission with little chance of survival, yet still officers and men of the Royal Navy volunteered to take part in the greatest raid.

Admiral Keyes wanted to act against Zeebrugge without delay, but it was fully acknowledged that the operation was highly dangerous and that casualties would be high. It was therefore felt that it was wrong to order men to their almost certain deaths and that the crews and the landing parties should be composed only of volunteers. An appeal was therefore made throughout the Royal Navy for volunteers, with eighty-six officers and 1,698 men, including 718 Royal Marines, being required for the operation.

In order that all parts of the Naval Service might share in the expedition, representative bodies of men were drawn from the Grand Fleet, the three Home Depots, the Royal Marine Artillery and Royal Marine Light Infantry. The ships and torpedo craft were furnished from the Dover Patrol, which was reinforced by vessels from the Harwich Force and the French Navy. The Royal Australian and Canadian navies, and the Admiralty Experimental Stations at Stratford and Dover, were also to be represented.

The interviews of those officers who had volunteered took place aboard the battleship HMS *Hindustan*, which was moored at Chatham Dockyard. Keyes took an active role in recruiting the senior naval officers for the operation. Those officers who were married were weeded out from the volunteers, whilst to the others Keyes was completely frank regarding the dangers that involvement in the raid would bring.

'It was very interesting to watch the reactions of the various officers – whom I interviewed singly,' Keyes recalled, 'when I told them that the enterprise would be hazardous, and finally said that the best chance of escape I could offer them after it, was a German prison until the end of the war. With one exception only, they appeared to be simply delighted and most grateful for the honour I had done them in offering them such a wonderful prospect!'

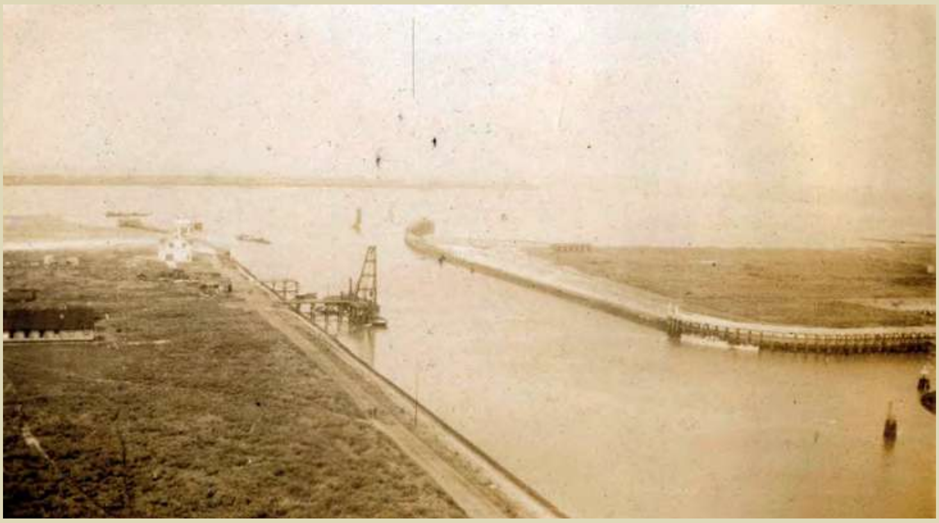
One such officer was Commander Patrick Edwards, who wrote in a manner that was reflected across all those that were selected for the operation: 'When I arrived back in Chatham I was full of it. I thought it was quite hopeless, but, oh my goodness, it was quite gloriously hopeless. It was desperate; but I realized our position and the frightful losses the U-boats were inflicting on our shipping were also desperate. The boats engaged were of no great fighting value; the officers and men? Ah! That was another matter. I went off to my cabin that night, but I could not sleep. How lucky I was to be in it.'

Once Keyes had chosen the senior naval officers, one of the responsibilities of those men was to select junior officers, NCOs and ratings for the operation from volunteers across all branches of the Royal Navy.

Leading Stoker Norbert McCrory was serving aboard the Indefatigable-class battlecruiser HMAS *Australia* when he heard that volunteers were required: 'On

The target of the Zeebrugge Raid - German torpedo-boats and U-boats alongside the Mole in the harbour during the First World War. (Paul Kendall Collection)

A German U-boat photographed passing down the Zeebrugge-Bruges Canal during the First World War. The presence of the men on the canal bank suggests that this was an important event. (Paul Kendall Collection)



A contemporary view of the entrance to the Zeebrugge-Bruges canal, with the end of the Mole in the distance. (Historic Military Press)

A portrait of one of the architects of the Zeebrugge Raid, Rear Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, taken in April 1917. (Historic Military Press)

23rd Feb 1918, the Grand Fleet returned to Rosyth, Scotland, after forty-eight hours convoying from Bergen to Aberdeen etc. We were a coaling ship, taking in about 2,000 tons of provisions etc. We, HMAS *Australia*, being the Flagship of the Second Battle-Cruiser Squadron, received a wireless asking for volunteers to the number of eleven men, for special service. On receiving the message, Seamen and Stokers were asked to volunteer. Soon it was seen all who wished to go could not be accepted, much to their disappointment.'

Generally, it would appear, that the officers had no difficulty in searching for volunteers. For some sailors, the opportunity to take part in such an adventurous, but risky enterprise, was appealing in comparison to the tedious routines of convoy work. Harry Adams was one of the volunteers from the Revenge-class battleship HMS *Royal Sovereign*. He volunteered because he, 'had nearly four years of War and was ready for all that was going – to hasten its end'.

Not all officers, however, found ready volunteers, some sailors having to be persuaded to step forward. Lieutenant Commander Ronald Boddie recalls how he had to encourage stokers to volunteer: 'In February 1918, the Admiralty called for a limited number of volunteers, for "a dangerous venture", from the Grand Fleet. The volunteers were to be unmarried, and of V.G. [very good] character, and the engine room quota for the 4th Battle Squadron, was to be 6 stokers from each ship, and one Lieut. Commander. No other particulars were given. The other squadrons … were to contribute equally. To my astonishment, the secret nature of the venture discouraged the men from volunteering, and I had great difficulty in persuading and cajoling 6 eligible but rather indifferent men to accompany me.'

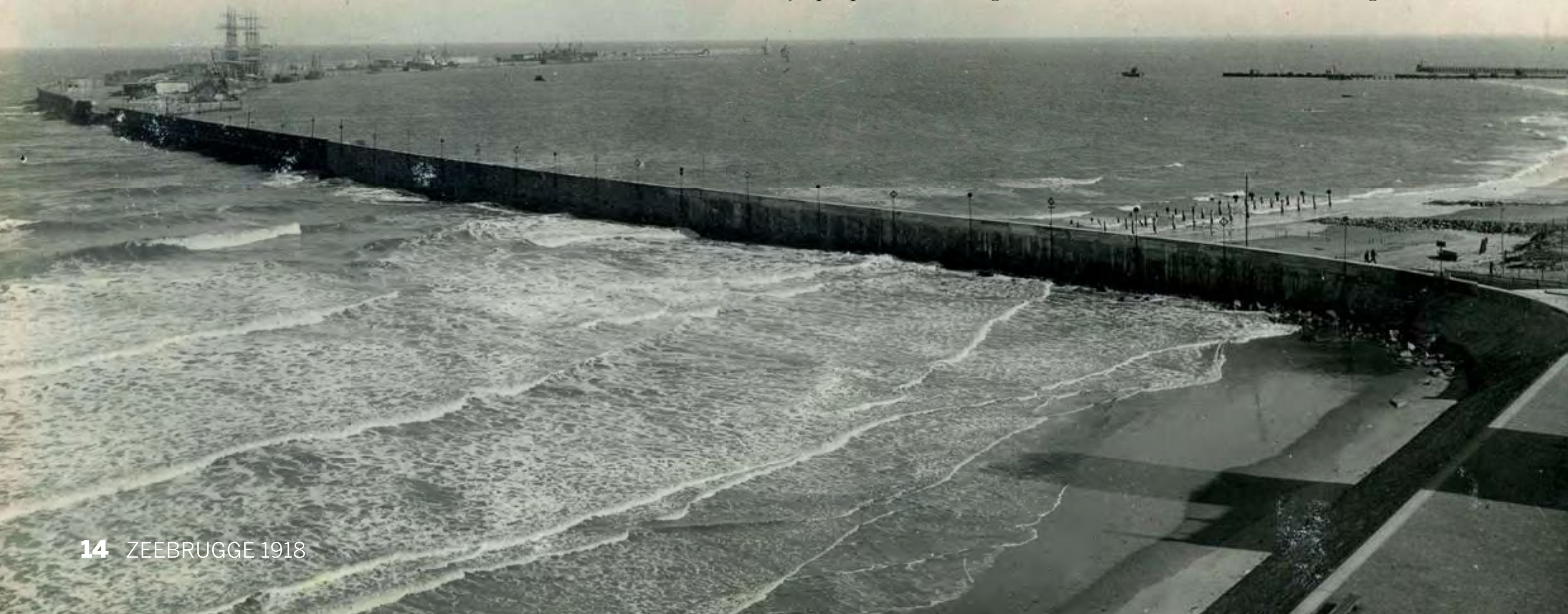
Some of the Motor Launch crews did not have the option to volunteer but were simply detailed for the operation. A journalist from the *Burnley Express* interviewed Leading Deckhand James Smith in 1940: 'In April 1918, he was serving as Leading Deckhand on Motor Launch 262, very small and fast vessels used for all kinds of purposes, including mine-laying and mine-sweeping. The crew was informed that they had been detailed to take part in a special mission – a particularly hazardous affair in which it was expected that 75 per cent of ships and men would be lost.'

The 4th Battalion, Royal Marines Light Infantry, supported by a detachment from the Royal Marines Artillery, was designated to carry out the diversionary element of the operation and assault Zeebrugge's Mole. Lieutenant Colonel Bertram Elliot DSO was appointed commanding officer, together with Major Alexander Cordner as his second-in-command.

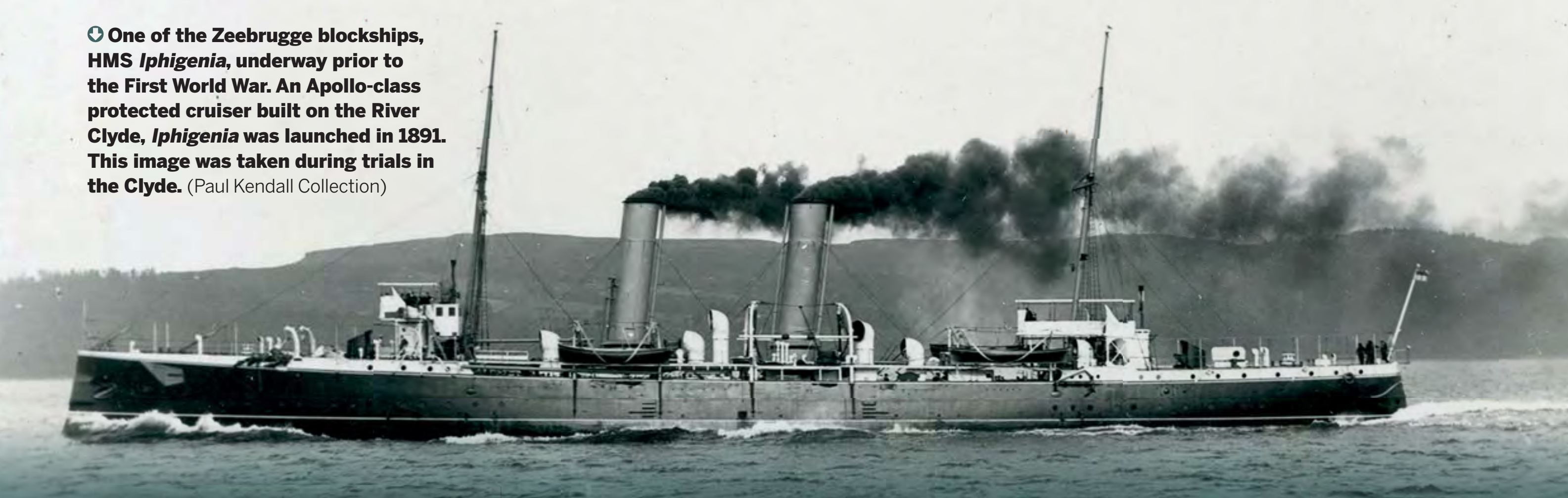
Some Royal Marines were eager to volunteer for this perilous operation. One young Royal Marine, Private William Hopewell, sought vengeance for the loss of brothers who had been killed on the Western Front. He told a journalist after the operation: 'I volunteered for this particular job because I lost two brothers at the front in six months and I wanted to get my own back.'

ASSEMBLING THE ASSAULTING FLOTILLA

Each of the various aspects of the raid on Zeebrugge necessitated different types of craft. Amongst the first requirements considered by Keyes and his staff was for a ship to land the diversionary force of Marines on the Mole – this would mean berthing the



A pre-war photograph of the Mole and harbour at Zeebrugge, the former sweeping round to the lighthouse at its end. The viaduct section that would be targeted by HMS *C3* during the raid can be seen at the shore end. Note also the entrance to the Zeebrugge-Bruges canal that can be seen on the far right of the image. (Historic Military Press)



One of the Zeebrugge blockships, HMS *Iphigenia*, underway prior to the First World War. An Apollo-class protected cruiser built on the River Clyde, *Iphigenia* was launched in 1891. This image was taken during trials in the Clyde. (Paul Kendall Collection)

One of the many who volunteered for the Zeebrugge Raid, Sub-Lieutenant (later Lieutenant Commander) John Howell-Price DSO, DSC served in the Royal Naval Reserve from 1915 to 1918, and then in the Royal Australian Navy from 1918 to 1921. As a lieutenant, he was part of the crew of HM Submarine *C3* during the attack, for which he received the Distinguished Service Order. He subsequently served with the Merchant Navy until his death on 13 November 1937 in Liverpool. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; A05732)

assault ship on the seaward side, which was not suitable for securing vessels. For this difficult operation, an old 6-inch gun Arrogant-class cruiser, HMS *Vindictive*, was selected. Captain Alfred Carpenter was duly appointed commander of *Vindictive*, though Captain Henry Halahan, who had been appointed commanding officer of the Royal Navy Landing Party on *Vindictive*, was more senior to Carpenter in rank. Keyes had a dilemma regarding the chain of command, for under Royal Naval regulations the senior officer was meant to be in command of a vessel, but he had promised command to Carpenter. Keyes was sensitive to Carpenter's likely disappointment if overall command was given to Halahan, so he made the irregular move to allow Carpenter to command *Vindictive*, under the provision that the senior officer, Halahan was in command of the naval assault team.

Five other obsolete cruisers were chosen for the operations to block the canal entrances at Zeebrugge and Ostend used by the enemy submarines. HM Ships *Thetis*, *Intrepid* and *Iphigenia* were selected for Zeebrugge, whilst HM Ships *Brilliant* and *Sirius* were chosen to be deployed at Ostend. These vessels would be filled with concrete and scuttled at the entrances of the canals leading to the German submarine base at Bruges.

It was also necessary to find suitable, sturdy, robust vessels that would be able to not only cross the English Channel and the North Sea to Zeebrugge, but which would also be capable of pushing and securing HMS *Vindictive* upon the Mole. If the elderly cruiser was sunk during the attack these vessels would form part of a contingency plan to evacuate the storming parties from the Mole and bring them back to Dover.

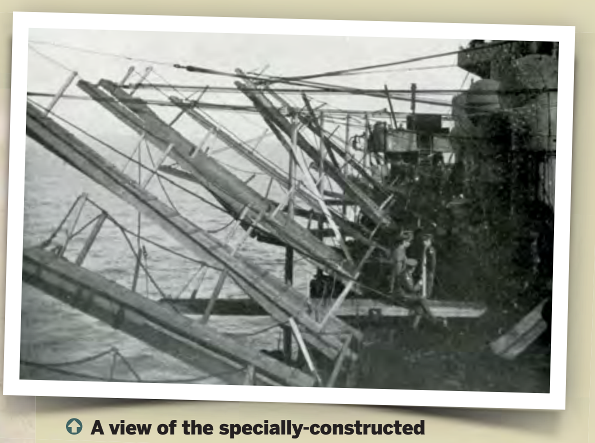
After a long search of many ports around the British coast by Captain Herbert C.J. Grant RN Retd.) and a representation of the Director of Dockyards, the Liverpool ferry-steamers *Iris* (renamed *Iris II*) and *Daffodil* (renamed *Daffodil IV*) were selected on account of their power, large carrying capacity (1,500 souls), and shallow draft. Commander Valentine Gibbs and Lieutenant Commander Harold Campbell were appointed to command *Iris* and *Daffodil* respectively.

Another of the Zeebrugge blockships, the Apollo-class protected cruiser HMS *Intrepid* was also launched in 1891. Along with a number of other ships of her class, as she became obsolete as a cruiser she was converted into a minelayer at Chatham Dockyard, equipped to carry 100 mines and with her armament reduced to four 4.7-inch guns. This work was completed in 1910. (Paul Kendall Collection)

German marine mines on the Mole at Zeebrugge. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; C04814)

The Mersey ferry *Daffodil*, renamed HMS *Daffodil IV* following her requistion, in her peacetime, civilian role. (Paul Kendall Collection)

ROYAL
DAFFODIL


A view of the specially-constructed gangways on HMS *Vindictive* prior to the Zeebrugge Raid in April 1918. Two of the parapet anchors for grappling the Mole can just be seen on the bridge in the background. (Paul Kendall Collection)

The sudden removal of the two ferries would be immediately noticed at Liverpool and questions would be asked which might reach the ears of the enemy. The Chief Naval Censor, Sir Douglas Brownrigg, was informed that these Mersey ferryboats were required for a secret operation and it was his job to make sure that no reports of the disappearance of the vessels appeared in the newspapers. Brownrigg realized that there was no point in simply approaching the editors of the local newspapers as the loss of the ferries would inconvenience hundreds of thousands of people throughout the North-West. 'I thereupon went and saw the Director of the Press Bureau,' Brownrigg recalled, 'and we all agreed that to circularise the papers in that district only would be no good, as if anybody in any other part of the country saw fit to drop a casual remark into any paper the secrecy which was so urgently necessary would be jeopardised or lost.

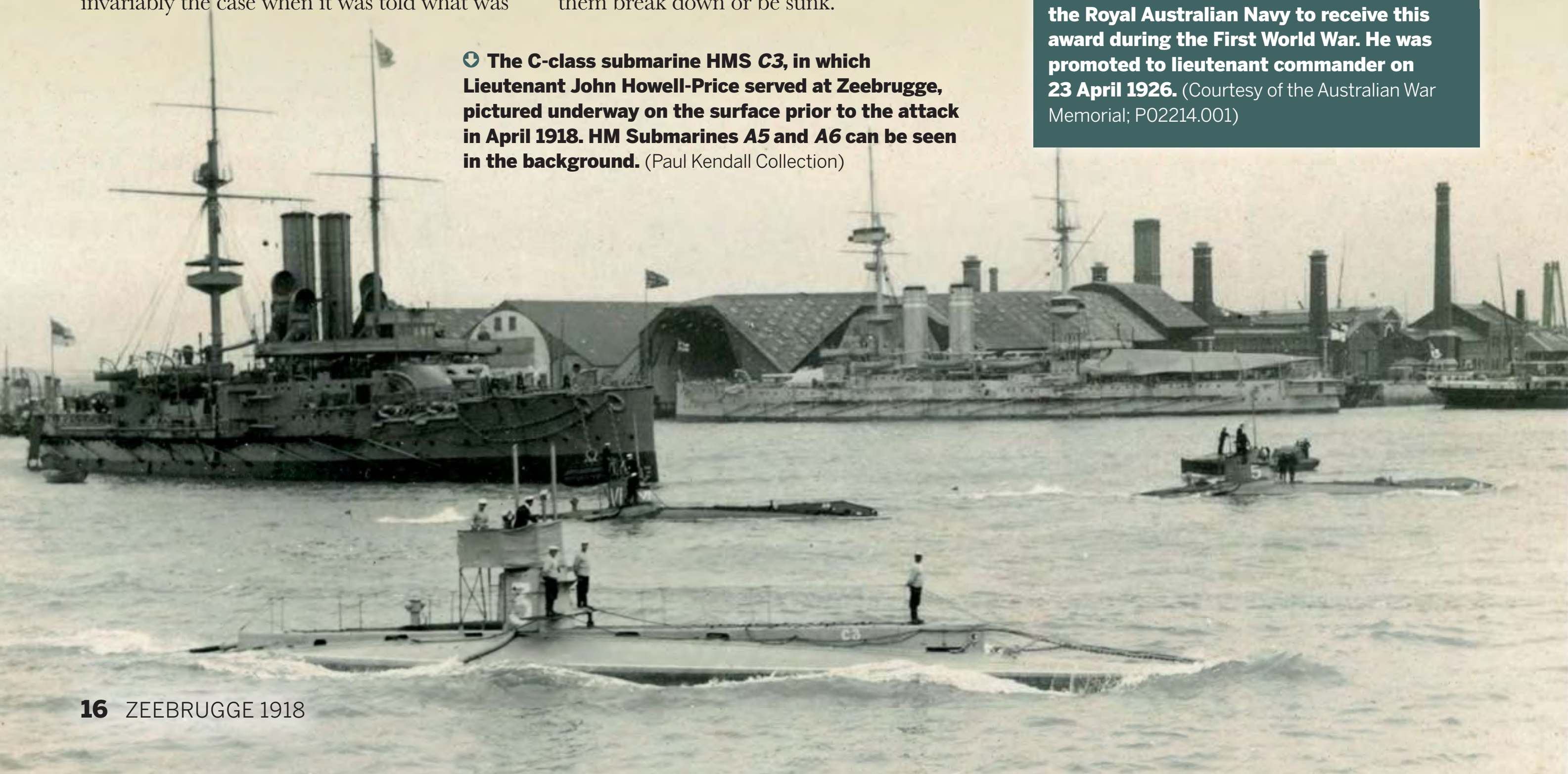
'It was decided, therefore, to circularise the whole Press confidentially, and surely a wiser decision never was taken, for in the three months of preparation for the raids on Zeebrugge and Ostend, and in spite of the two attempts which were made, never a sign or trace of news got out. Not the vaguest reference was ever made, and the Press, as was invariably the case when it was told what was expected of it, loyally carried out the wishes of the Admiralty.'

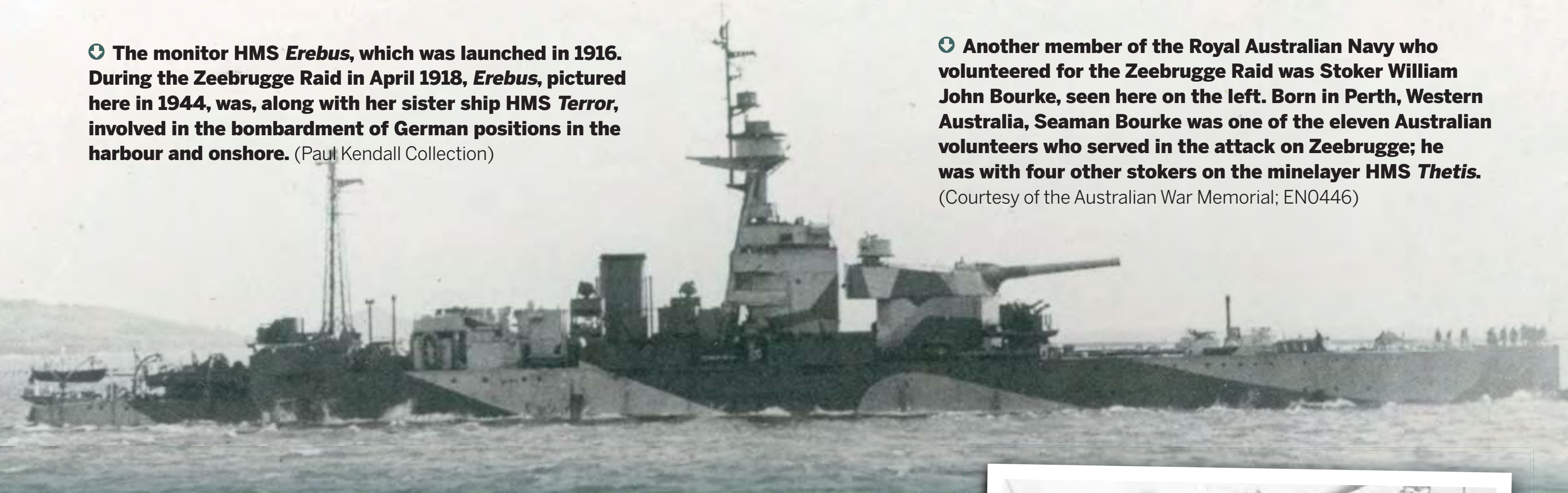
Though no reports would appear in the press, there was still a chance that questions might be asked by Members of Parliament in the House of Commons about the withdrawal of the boats from service. Again, Brownrigg noted: 'Having fixed the Press, I then went and saw the Speaker of the House of Commons and told him what was going on, and begged him to stop any questions being put on the "paper", which I knew might very well happen. He agreed to see any member who wished to put any question on the commandeering of these two vessels and tell him the circumstances and ask him to refrain.'

Two obsolete C-Class submarines, HMS *C1* and HMS *C3*, were then selected for the objective of destroying the viaduct, severing the link between the Mole and the mainland, in an effort to prevent German reinforcements from overwhelming the landing parties. With their bows packed with high explosives, the crews of *C1* and *C3* were instructed to ram into the viaduct and light time fuzes before escaping in motorized dinghies. For the raid, each submarine carried a complement of two officers and four men, there being two submarines as a precaution should one of them break down or be sunk.

ZEEBRUGGE RAID VOLUNTEER

Lieutenant William Henry Vaughan Edgar DSC, RAN, in the centre, is pictured with a party of civilians on HMAS *Australia* in a British port in 1918. It was whilst serving on HMAS *Australia* that Artificer Engineer Edgar volunteered to serve in the Zeebrugge Raid, being appointed engineer of HMS *Iris*. During the attack he worked unceasingly to keep *Iris* going while under heavy fire. After the bridge was shot away Edgar showed great bravery in coming onto the upper deck to turn on the smoke apparatus, so that *Iris* could safely withdraw without further loss. For his part in the raid, Edgar was recommended for special promotion to lieutenant and was awarded the DSC, the only member of the Royal Australian Navy to receive this award during the First World War. He was promoted to lieutenant commander on 23 April 1926. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; P02214.001)


The C-class submarine HMS *C3*, in which Lieutenant John Howell-Price served at Zeebrugge, pictured underway on the surface prior to the attack in April 1918. HM Submarines *A5* and *A6* can be seen in the background. (Paul Kendall Collection)



The monitor HMS *Erebus*, which was launched in 1916. During the Zeebrugge Raid in April 1918, *Erebus*, pictured here in 1944, was, along with her sister ship HMS *Terror*, involved in the bombardment of German positions in the harbour and onshore. (Paul Kendall Collection)

Another member of the Royal Australian Navy who volunteered for the Zeebrugge Raid was Stoker William John Bourke, seen here on the left. Born in Perth, Western Australia, Seaman Bourke was one of the eleven Australian volunteers who served in the attack on Zeebrugge; he was with four other stokers on the minelayer HMS *Thetis*. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; EN0446)

Additional vessels were required to assist with tasks such as providing protection for the assault ships whilst the flotilla was at sea, recovering the blockship crews, executing diversionary measures such as smoke screening to conceal the raiders' approach, as well as undertake long range bombardment from the sea. It fell to a motley selection of monitors, Coastal Motor Boats (CMBs) and Motor Launches (MLs – heavier and slower than the CMBs) to form part of the support fleet. For their part, it was the monitors which were allocated the role of bombarding the German shore batteries to cover the raiders and blockships on the approach to the canal entrances. They would work in conjunction with the recently-formed Royal Air Force which was assigned bombing targets from the air. A total of seventy-four vessels were used in the operation.

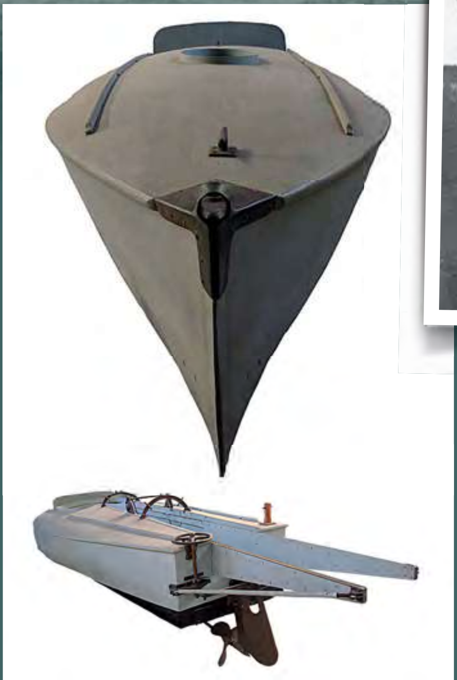
GETTING READY

To ensure that the armada was concealed from the German batteries on the Mole and on the shore, it was deemed necessary to lay a dense smoke screen. It fell to Wing Commander Frank Arthur Brock to devise and execute this element of the plan.

The son of Arthur Brock of the famous C.T. Brock & Co. firm of fireworks manufacturers, Brock, who founded, organized and commanded the Royal Navy Experimental Station at Stratford, was the inventor of the flameless smoke screen. Having originally enlisted in the Royal Artillery on 10 October 1914, Brock was, within a month, loaned to the Royal Navy, to which he transferred by the end of the same month. A member of the Admiralty Board of Invention and Research, Brock was not only responsible for inventing the flameless smoke screen, but also the Dover Flare, which was used in anti-submarine warfare, the Brock Colour Filter, and, perhaps his greatest contribution, the Brock Incendiary Bullet or Brock Anti-Zeppelin Bullet, which proved highly effective against the hydrogen-filled German airships (the first to be shot down was destroyed by this ammunition).

The creation of the chemicals and the necessary equipment to form the smoke screen for the raid was undertaken by three officers and eighty-seven men from the Royal Naval Air Service. They conducted their work in a specially constructed workshop in Dover Dockyard, where the installation of smoke apparatus on the MLs and CMBs took place. No element of the entire operation was more important than the smoke screen, without which there was virtually no chance of the flotilla reaching Zeebrugge undetected and thus at very real risk of being blown out of the water.

Keyes had wanted to launch the operation to block Zeebrugge during March 1918, but the scarce supply of chloro-sulphuric acid for the smoke screens, as well as delays in the fitting-out of the ships involved, which was an enormous task, forced a postponement. HMS *Vindictive*, the blockships and the Mersey ferries also had to be adapted for the operation and it was a huge undertaking, with *Vindictive* and the blockships being prepared in Chatham Dockyard, and *Iris* and *Daffodil* at Portsmouth.



Though it is an example of the type of Coastal Motor Boat used during the Zeebrugge Raid in 1918, this particular craft, CMB 4, is not a veteran of the attack. Donated to the Imperial War Museum by Thornycroft in 1975, it is in fact the Coastal Motor Boat captained by Augustus Agar during the raid on Krondstadt in June 1919 for which he was subsequently awarded the Victoria Cross. (Historic Military Press/Robert Mitchell)

Much of the selection for the men required for the Zeebrugge Raid took place on this warship, the King Edward VII-class pre-dreadnought battleship HMS *Hindustan*. In May 1918, just a few weeks after the raid, HMS *Hindustan* was decommissioned. She finished the war as an accommodation ship, being disposed of in 1919. (Historic Military Press)

Everything not needed for the operation was stripped from the ships. *Vindictive* and the two ferries were fitted with sheet armour as protection for the troops as they approached the heavily-defended Mole. A wooden chafing band ran the whole length of *Vindictive*'s port-side, along with hazel fenders. Her main mast was removed completely, and her foremast became a mere stump to support a 'fighting top' reminiscent of Nelson's times, armed with machine-guns and other weapons. Some of the removed main mast was cemented to her deck to maintain her in position once she was alongside the Mole. She had 7.5-inch howitzers in place of most of her main guns, although the foremost and rearmost 6-inch guns remained. An 11-inch howitzer was placed abaft her rearmost funnel.

Next, she was given a false deck reached by planks, and on which eighteen folding brows – otherwise known as gangways – were attached so that, at the time of their arrival, the tide would put them at the height of the roadway which was sixteen feet higher than the main wall of the Mole (on the night, nearly all of these were to be destroyed before they could be used). Mattress-protected flamethrower houses were also constructed fore and aft of the false deck on the port side.

Lieutenant Commander Ronald Boddie, who was the designated engineer officer aboard the blockship *Thetis*, wrote: 'The *Vindictive* looked more like a Christmas tree, than a cruiser. A false deck covered the Port battery, access to which was by broad ramps, from the Starboard battery. Half a dozen wooden brows were triced up, over the false deck by which the storming parties could rush onto the Mole.

'Special fenders were fitted to the Port side of the quarterdeck, to keep the ship in position at the Mole, and to help fend off the stern when leaving. A steel hut was erected on the Port side of the Fore Bridge, and another at the Port After end of the boat deck, and contained Flammenwerfer apparatus under the control of Commander Brock … Topmasts were removed, and the ship bristled with Stokes mortars, Pom-poms, and Lewis guns, and two 7.5-inch Howitzers were added. Many underwater compartments were stuffed full with drums and casks for the preservation of buoyancy, and dozens of grapnels were lying about on deck, to be carried onto the Mole.' HMS *Vindictive* had become a floating fortress.

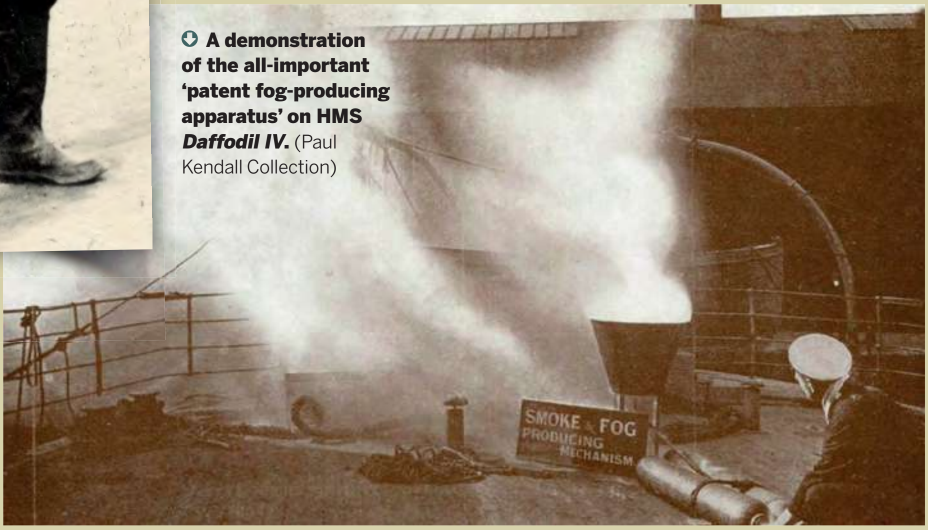
Members of the crew of the battleship HMS *King George V* who volunteered for the Zeebrugge Raid, April 1918. (Historic Military Press)

Leading Stoker Norbert McCrory, meanwhile, wrote of the modifications that were taking place aboard *Thetis*: 'The blockships, as they were termed, had all the most important parts removed, to give room to scrap iron and concrete. These boats were filled in such a way so as to make their removal impossible during war-time, from the place they were to be sunk.'

Maintaining secrecy while these preparations were being made in Portsmouth and Chatham was a great challenge and a major concern for First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss, for he wrote: 'I have never got over the surprise that I had at the success which attended our efforts in keeping the expedition secret. Hundreds of people had to know of it because of the extensive preparations, and yet the Press never got an inkling of the proposal. Ships were prepared in the dockyards and it was quite impossible to keep them out of sight. The Marine Battalion was specially trained at Deal; in fact, had any busybody thought of what it all meant and had he set the whisper starting, there was no possibility of keeping the matter quiet.'

Wemyss even decided to keep information of the impending operation from the then Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, until the raiding force was off the Belgian coast. Despite being advised that he might offend the Prime Minister, Wemyss knew that if the enemy heard the slightest rumour of an attack, the operation would be a bloody disaster. ◉

Wing Commander Frank Arthur Brock OBE. It is stated that when left for the raid he took with him a box marked 'Highly Explosive: Do Not Open', which contained bottles of vintage port which were consumed by his men. (Historic Military Press)



A demonstration of the all-important 'patent fog-producing apparatus' on HMS *Daffodil IV*. (Paul Kendall Collection)

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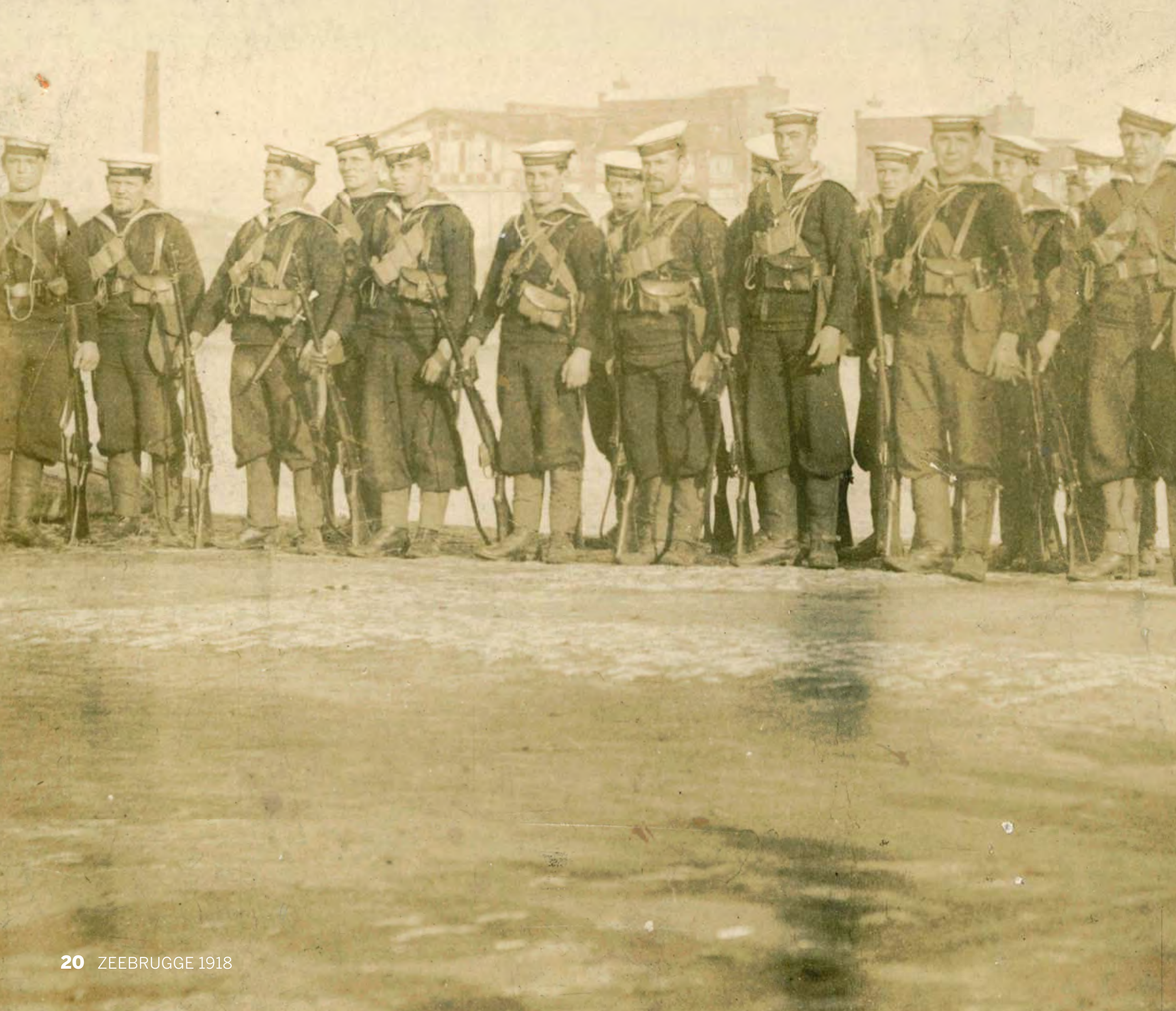
Death or Glory Boys

If the attack upon Zeebrugge stood any chance of success, every element of the raid had to be rehearsed time and time again. It was not just success, but survival, that depended on how well each man would perform.

Men of the Royal Navy Landing Party pictured during training for the Zeebrugge Raid. Those identified include: Able Seaman William Botley, can be seen standing far left; Able Seaman Charles Pooley, who spent his 21st birthday on the Mole during the operation, is sixth from left; Leading Seaman Leonard Ellams is in the front row, seventh from the left; standing to his right is Able Seaman Walter Taylor; Able Seaman Hubert Hellar is directly behind Taylor; whilst Able Seaman Edward Tolra is in the front row fourth from left. (Paul Kendall Collection)



The unique nature of the proposed raid on Zeebrugge meant that there was no previous experience to draw upon. The last time that the Royal Navy had conducted an amphibious assault upon a heavily-defended Channel port was in the days of Nelson, when indeed Ostend had been attacked. So considerable effort had to be put into preparing the crews and the landing parties, who would have to conduct their manoeuvres in the dark and under heavy fire.

To make such preparation even more difficult, with secrecy still the overriding concern of the planners, the teams would have to be trained without the men being told the object of the operation.

THE ROYAL MARINES

The first unit designated for the Zeebrugge operation to commence training was 'A' Company, 4th Battalion Royal Marine Light Infantry based at Chatham – the battalion's War Diary records that this started on 15 February 1918 when the company proceeded to Higham. Marine Lance Corporal George Calverley recalled that he and his comrades were initially trained close to Rochester, Kent, and that the nature of their training specifically focused upon night time combat: 'I had a modern rifle and our training was different to the usual. We were firing at targets at night by the Very lights. These were lights fired into the air from the Very light pistols and which gave a glimmer of light for several seconds. We were also advancing down the range and firing at targets through the smoke and there was more than the usual amount of bayonet practice.'[1]

Two other companies of Royal Marines, one from Plymouth and the other from Portsmouth, joined Calverley's company, and the whole force, plus Royal Marine Artillery in the form of Howitzer and Stokes Gun details, and a Machine Gun section, became the 4th Royal Marine Battalion. On 21 February, Battalion Headquarters moved to Deal to continue the training at battalion level. At

Private David Robert Latimer, seen here on the right with unidentified colleagues, was serving in 'A' Company, 4th Battalion Royal Marine Light Infantry when he volunteered to take part in the raid. Dated April 1918, this image was taken just days before he was killed in action at Zeebrugge. (Paul Kendall Collection)

A picture of Able Seaman Frederick James Larby DSM, RN, who volunteered to serve as a member of the Royal Navy landing party during the raid in April 1918. (Paul Kendall Collection)

this stage, officers were told what they were training for, but the other ranks were kept in the dark. The men, though, had to be told something, so they were informed that they were rehearsing for an attack upon a dry canal in Northern France.

At Wouldham, a village on the banks of the Medway, a mock-up of the Mole at Zeebrugge had been constructed, although it was not named. Some of the assault troops trained there throughout February and March 1918, other Royal Marines having been detailed to act as German defenders. Unidentified models and aerial photographs were used as training aids. Of the training programme, Captain Arthur Chater, the 4th Battalion's adjutant, later wrote: 'The Battalion was concentrated at Deal where we gradually worked them up. We lay out on a certain bit of down land near St Margaret's Bay the shape of the Mole and although we didn't tell the men what it was, we practised assaulting this particular shape. It wasn't until they had embarked that they were told that the shape that they had been assaulting was the Mole at Zeebrugge.'[2]

Lieutenant F.J. Hore, who was the battalion quartermaster, described the daily training programme provided for the Marines: 'The Mole, with the fullest information available from aerial photographs, etc, was taped out on Freedown [an area of open land on the coast near Deal, Kent] and its attack constantly rehearsed under every possible combination of circumstances … The afternoon was devoted to physical training. Night training, carried out on Freedown, depended upon there being no moon, as darkness was essential to accustom all ranks to conditions of the operations ahead. Smoke floats, red, white, and green Very lights, short lights, dummy bombs, rockets, flares, and torches, were all used in practice.'[3]

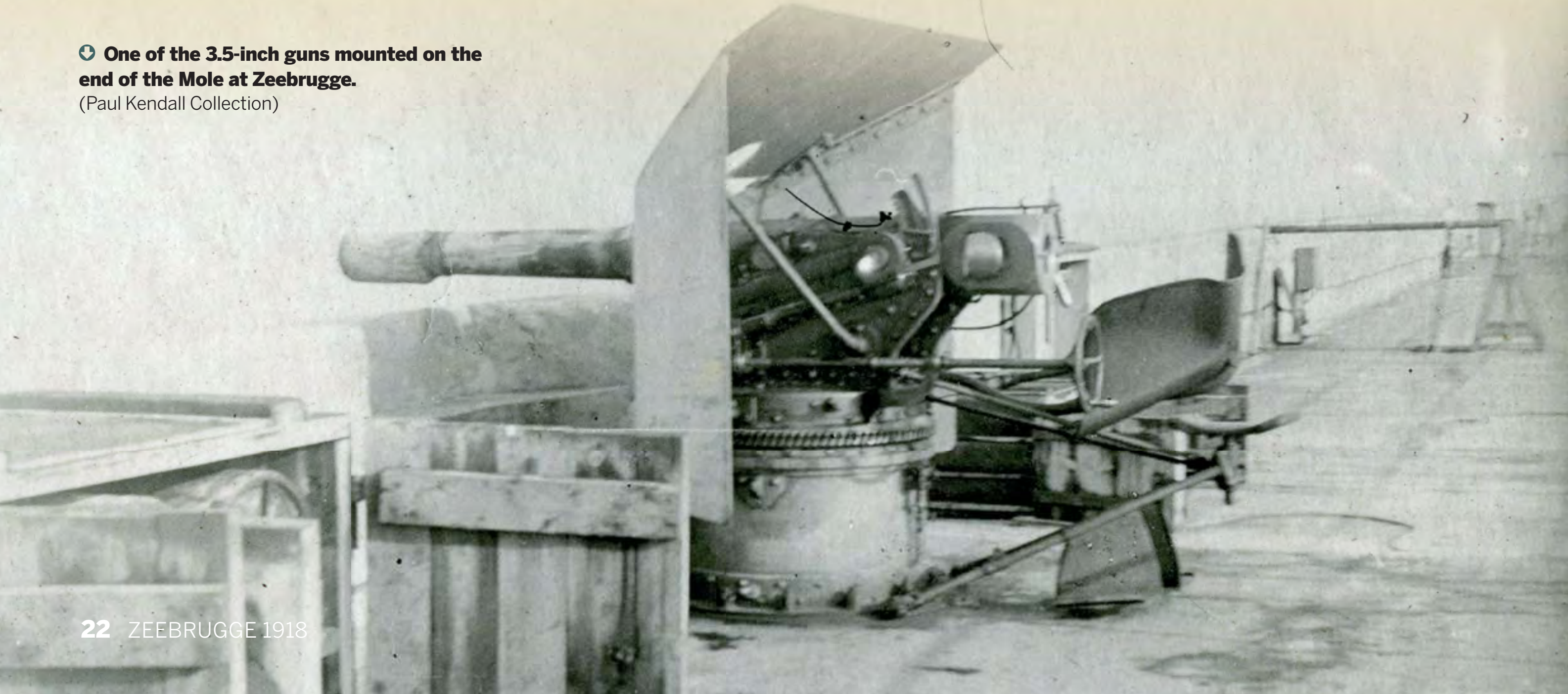
Lieutenant-Commander Arthur Harrison VC photographed before the Zeebrugge Raid when he was serving as a lieutenant. An accomplished rugby player, he earnt two caps for England in games against France and Ireland. He was aged 32 when he was killed during the attack on the Mole Battery at Zeebrugge. Able Seaman Eves made a brave attempt to bring Harrison's body back to *Vindictive*, but he too was shot and remained on the Mole until he was captured. There are two British naval officers buried in Zeebrugge Churchyard and it is likely that Harrison is one of those men buried there. (Paul Kendall Collection)

DEATH OR GLORY BOYS

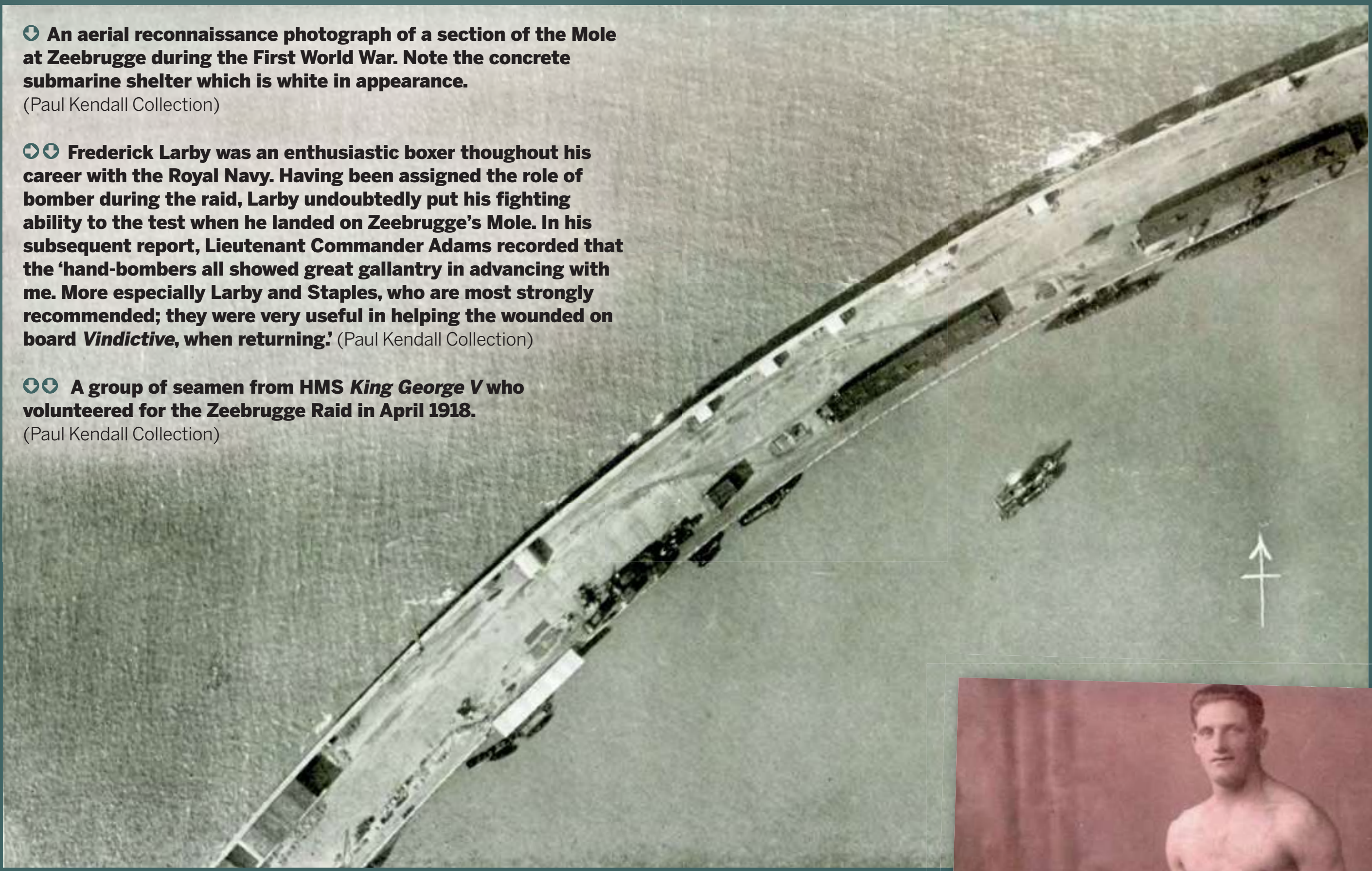
Some of the sailors who would form the Royal Navy landing party began their training as soon as they were selected and before they were sent to Chatham where the entire Royal Navy force was being assembled. Harry Adams, one of the volunteers from the Revenge-class battleship HMS *Royal Sovereign*, noted, for example, how he began his training at Scapa Flow:

'Now for a general look at our routine whilst still with the Fleet. We were finished with our own ship altogether; and volunteers from "All" ships (quite a big party by this time) would report aboard a certain "Flag Ship" or ship detached and from there, we would land each day under our own respective officers … Well, we would land to one of the islands in Scapa Flow, with unlimited supplies of revolver ammunition, shoot at targets, seals, hares, practically aim at anything to help make you a good shot, and I suppose, get you accustomed to all a revolver would mean later on. … Other days, we would land for an all-day paper chase over the hills. Plenty of boat pulling, physical jerks, etc., in fact anything that could be thought of to get a man really fit.'

The Royal Navy force that would land at Zeebrugge was divided into four companies designated 'A', 'B', 'C', and 'D', each containing fifty men. 'A' and 'B' were to assault the Mole from HMS *Vindictive*, while 'C' and 'D' would land on the Mole from *Daffodil* and *Iris* respectively. Each company was subdivided into four sections consisting of twelve men.



One of the 3.5-inch guns mounted on the end of the Mole at Zeebrugge. (Paul Kendall Collection)



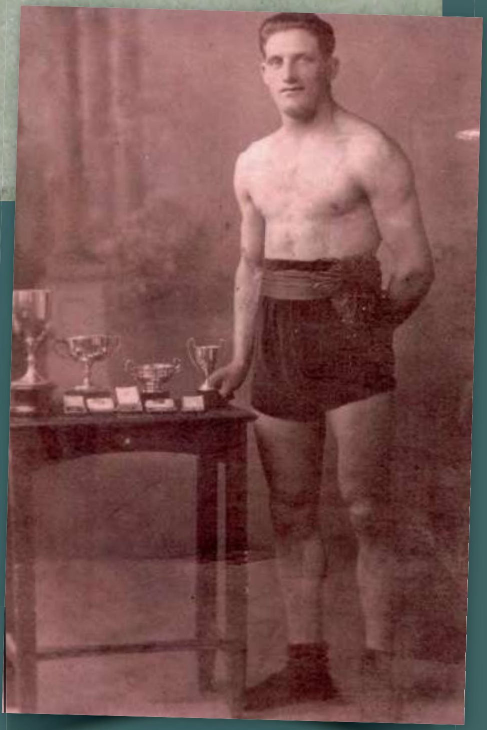
An aerial reconnaissance photograph of a section of the Mole at Zeebrugge during the First World War. Note the concrete submarine shelter which is white in appearance. (Paul Kendall Collection)

Frederick Larby was an enthusiastic boxer thoughout his career with the Royal Navy. Having been assigned the role of bomber during the raid, Larby undoubtedly put his fighting ability to the test when he landed on Zeebrugge's Mole. In his subsequent report, Lieutenant Commander Adams recorded that the 'hand-bombers all showed great gallantry in advancing with me. More especially Larby and Staples, who are most strongly recommended; they were very useful in helping the wounded on board *Vindictive*, when returning.' (Paul Kendall Collection)

A group of seamen from HMS *King George V* who volunteered for the Zeebrugge Raid in April 1918. (Paul Kendall Collection)

Petty Officer William O'Hara later recalled the moment when he reported at Chatham Barracks, where HMS *Hindustan*, an obsolete pre-dreadnaught class battleship, was designated to provide accommodation for the assaulting teams and crews: 'There was great speculations as to what we were there for but no one could satisfy our curiosity. We were eventually detailed off into four sections, men belonging to ships of the same squadron being detailed to the same section. As I belonged to the 2nd Battle Squadron, I formed 4 Section under the command of Lieutenant Commander Bradford and Lieutenant Hawkings.'

With the limited information given, and the oft-repeated expectation that few would return from the raid, the Zeebrugge operation was openly regarded as a suicide mission. When the men arrived at Chatham they could see the hasty preparations being made to HMS *Vindictive* and the blockships. Rumours were rife around the dockyard – as Leading Seaman W.W. Childs recalled. 'In no time we gained nicknames such as: "The Suicide Club", "Death or Glory Boys", "Jellicoe's Light Horse", etc.'



Though the Royal Marine officers had already been told of the exact nature of the mission, the Royal Navy officers were not informed until 2 March, when they were addressed personally by Keyes onboard *Hindustan*. Of this, Lieutenant Commander Ronald Boddie wrote: 'Rear Admiral Roger Keyes gave the assembled officers a full explanation of the intended operation. The general scheme was for the *Vindictive* to go alongside the Mole, on the seaward side, and to land storming parties on it, and to create a noisy and flashy diversionary demonstration, to enable the blockships to sneak undetected into the harbour, and up the channel. Three blockships were to be sunk at the Zeebrugge end of the Bruges to Zeebrugge canal, and simultaneously two blockships were to be sunk at Ostend, to block the Bruges to Ostend canal.'

The graves of four of the Zeebrugge Raid's first casualties. From right to left are the headstones of Gunner A. Large, Gunner F. Belfield, Gunner S.E. Houchen (non-CWGC) and Gunner A.T. Aldridge, all Royal Marine Artillery. The four were killed on 1 April 1918 during training for the Zeebrugge Raid when a Stokes Mortar round exploded at Kingsdown Beach, Kent. The four casualties are all buried side-by-side in Hamilton Road Cemetery, Deal. (Historic Military Press)

The non-CWGC headstone of Gunner S.E. Houchen, Royal Marine Artillery, one of the four killed men on Kingsdown Beach, Kent, when a Stokes Mortar round exploded during the pre-raid training on 1 April 1918. Lieutenant Daniel Broadwood was standing behind No.2 Gun at the time of the incident and reported that: 'The battery of 4 guns had received the order "Four rounds gun fire" and were carrying out this order when No.1 gun burst killing 4 men and injuring 6. The shell must have been placed in the gun in the correct way as the cartridge container was found in the bottom half of the gun.' Lieutenant Colonel Elliot noted the following in his report to the Adjutant General, Brigadier General H.S. Neville White, on 2 April: 'I was present at the time of the accident and can offer no other explanation than that the burst was due to a premature explosion due to faulty ammunition.' (Historic Military Press/Robert Mitchell)

TIN HATS AND KHAKI

Whilst the other ranks were still kept in the dark, they were given specific orders according to their designated roles. Leading Stoker Norbert McCrory wrote: 'After a few days on board our jobs came along, the seamen to learn all about trench warfare, bomb throwing and special bayonet drill. Our seamen did their share and came out with most marks to their credit, after the Marines had a good try to beat them.'

The Royal Navy storming party was kitted out with khaki uniforms and, as McCrory noted, given special training by the Army in order to prepare them for their diversionary attack upon Zeebrugge Mole. In many cases this training was provided by the 5th Battalion Middlesex Regiment. In his account Harry Adams goes on to state: 'Now, while at Chatham, we joined the 5th Middlesex Regiment, or rather came under them for a certain amount of instructions. I laugh when I think about it now for we weren't frightened of any RSMs or CQMs – or whatever they were, never-er'd-of-em – and told them so! We gave them to understand we were sailors and belonged to the Royal Navy, and that they had better get to know it from the start, or conveyed as much. But – and a big but, believe you and me within a very few hours they had knocked "Ten Bells" out of us.

A portrait of Midshipman David Ray Morris, RNR, who served in the crew of CMB 22B during the Zeebrugge Raid. CMB 22B was deployed as part of the smoke screen force and went in ahead of the assault ships to carry out its duties near the Mole Battery and lighthouse. Having survived the raid, Midshipman Morris continued to serve in the Royal Navy and, finally, Merchant Navy. (Paul Kendall Collection)

'It seemed our Instructors were quite recently back from the front line trenches, and mad for the kill, and to achieve it on us. They seemed to have lived in Hell.'

The training, Harry concluded, 'consisted chiefly of Trench Warfare – you remember, long point – short point – jab and butt stroke stuff. Revolver practice – and night exercises against the Regiment … We did quite a lot of jujitsu, armed, and un-armed; it is astounding, how easy it is (after practice of course), to disarm a man, armed with a rifle and bayonet, and yourself with nothing – no matter how big he is.'

Adams also recalled this transformation from sailor to soldier with some pride: 'Soon, we Matloes were put into "Khaki", a good laugh for the Chatham Dockyard Maties that day, for as we marched from the Royal Marine Barracks, with our "Sailor Rig" under our arm … we were issued with a "Tin Hat", and we felt very important.'

Not all the sailors felt as Harry Adams did, and there was some dissent amongst the men. Henry Groothius, serving in the Royal Naval Air Service, recalled an incident during training when a group of sailors challenged an Army instructor: 'We had a row with the army instructor … He started bullying the sailor. We knew that a hell of a lot weren't going to come back and he found out to his cost that he was surrounded by 100 men with fixed bayonets.

Our Lieutenant came up and asked what was the matter and we told him that he was bullying the sailors.'[4]

The situation was exacerbated by the fact that no leave was permitted. At the same time, the temporary messes in *Hindustan* were overcrowded and uncomfortable. But it was when a party of stokers from the Grand Fleet first saw the blockships to which they had been assigned, that actual trouble broke out. They had been led to believe that they were going to fight in some glorious operation, but found instead that they were merely to handle coal, raise steam, and to clean up unwanted rubble and cement on some obsolete ships. Such was their anger, and resultant insubordination, a number of them had to be dismissed and returned to their ships. Had they known just how perilous and dashing a raid they were to embark on, their reactions would, no doubt, have been quite different.

Some sailors did manage to sneak out of the dockyard however. As there were so many ships at Chatham, it was easy to borrow the hat ribbon of another ship and walk past the sentries at the dock gates unsuspected and unchallenged. As one who did gain a few hours freedom in this fashion pointed out, they had no real idea what they were being trained for and so could not have revealed any secrets.

There was also a serious breach of discipline amongst the Royal Marines at Deal on 15 March, which resulted in the removal of an entire Portsmouth platoon – both officers and men. Replacements were drafted in. Possibly because of this incident, the Royal Marines were at last permitted leave. On 21 March, they were told they would have four days' leave and special trains were arranged to take them to London Bridge and Charing Cross railway stations in London.

The village of Kingsdown is located immediately to the south of Walmer on the Kent coast. The beach at Kingsdown, isolated and hidden from view, was used by personnel training for the Zeebrugge Raid in 1918. (Historic Military Press)

A picture of Private Arthur Leonard Burnell, Royal Marine Light Infantry, who volunteered for the Zeebrugge Raid. (Paul Kendall Collection)

A RIGHT ROYAL SEND OFF

During the time the Marines were training at Deal they received visits from a number of dignitaries. Amongst them, on 7 March, was King George V. Lance Corporal George Calverley was one of the men present on the parade ground at Deal Barracks: 'I was standing in the supernumerary rank two paces behind my section. He had a very gruff voice. He looked at me for a couple of seconds and as he passed on I heard him remark to the accompanying General about someone being very young and I assumed that it was me he was referring to.'

Private Jim Clist, from No.12 Platoon, also remembered coming face to face with the King that day: 'I was wearing the Mons Star ribbon at that time and he mentioned something to me about the Mons Star and would have shook hands with me had I put my hand out, but I was too flustered to do anything.'

Sergeant Harry Wright was the Platoon Sergeant of No.10 Platoon. As well as the King's visit, he recalled being inspected by 'the First Sea Lord and the Adjutant-General of the Marines. The latter informed us that what we were going to do would live in history, and he hoped that each man would do his duty, and uphold the honour of the Corps, whose fame was known all over the world. Anybody who did not wish to go had the privilege of falling out, but not a single man accepted the offer, so we were all volunteers.'

A similar opportunity was provided by Winston Churchill, who at that time was serving as the Minister of Munitions. Private Ernest 'Beau' Tracey later detailed how the men were formed up on the North Barracks Parade Ground at Deal and duly inspected by Churchill, who spent one and a half hours with the Marines, speaking to each man on parade.

After the inspection they closed in around Churchill as he stood on a platform and addressed them. Tracey recalled the Minister's exact words in a presentation he gave in 1979: 'You are going on a daring and arduous stunt from which none of you may return,' he told the assembled ranks, 'but every endeavour will be made to bring back as many of you as possible. Should any of you, for any reason whatsoever desire not to go, you may, on dismissal of this parade, go to your company office, hand in your name and not a word will be said.' No one did. ◉

Another picture of Private Arthur Leonard Burnell, who can be seen here on the left. Burnell was just 19 years old when he succumbed to wounds inflicted at Zeebrugge. Buried in Scunthorpe Cemetery, the inscription on his headstone reads: 'To the memory of Private Arthur Burnell, who died of wounds received at Zeebrugge on 23 April 1918. This stone is erected as a token of respect and esteem by his shipmates of HMS *Emperor of India*. He gave his life for his friends and country.' The Commonwealth War Graves Commission lists his date of death as 24 April 1918. (Paul Kendall Collection)

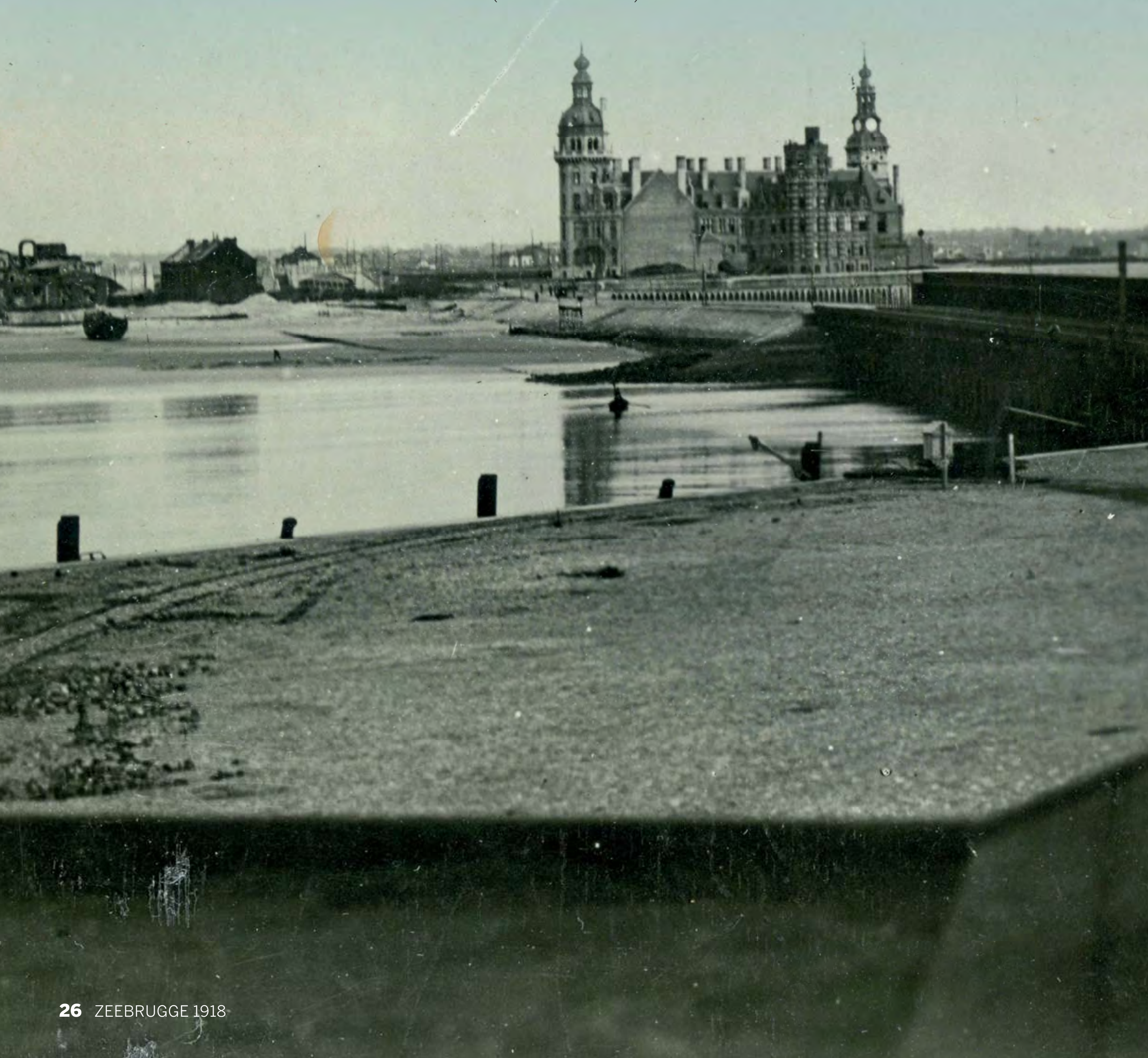
NOTES:

1. Lance Corporal Calverley's full account can be found in Paul Kendall's excellent book *The Zeebrugge Raid 1918* (Frontline Books, Barnsley, 2016).
2. Paul Kendall, ibid.
3. *Globe & Laurel*, the official journal of the Royal Marines, 1918.
4. Liddle Collection, University of Leeds, Liddle/ WW1/ RNMN/Rec/037.

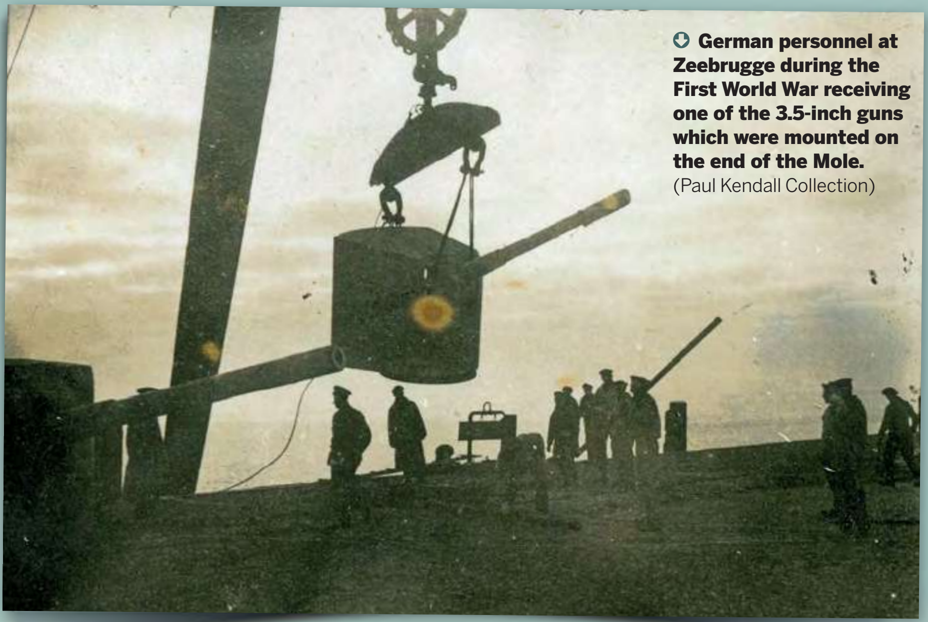
The Waiting Game

Once the fitting up of ships and training of crews was completed, they had to be assembled somewhere where they could wait until conditions were deemed most suitable – somewhere hidden from the world.

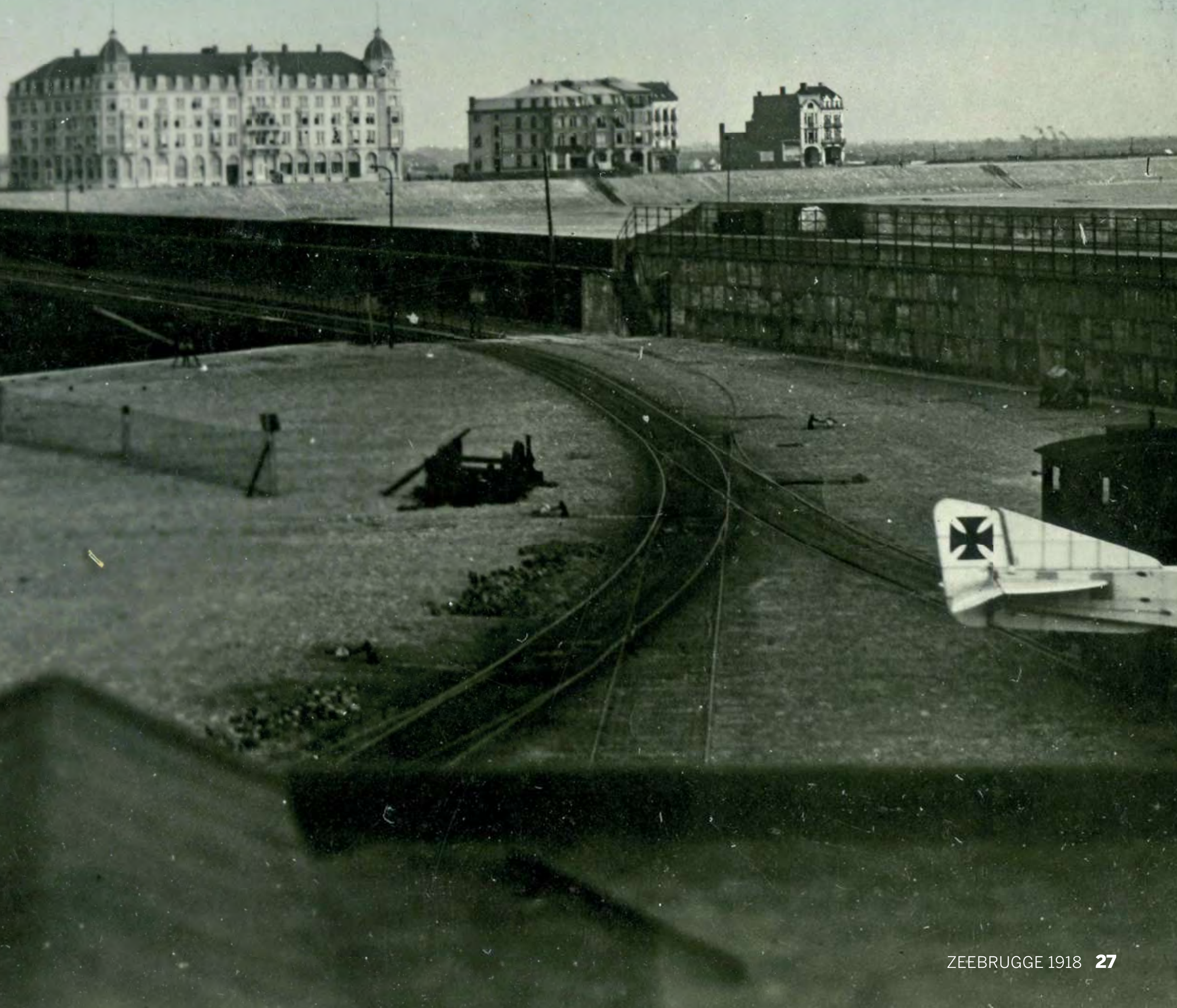
A view of the viaduct connecting the Mole to the shore at Zeebrugge, taken by a German photographer during the First World War, from the seaplane base (possibly from the roof of the hangar). Note the aircraft on the right. (Paul Kendall Collection)

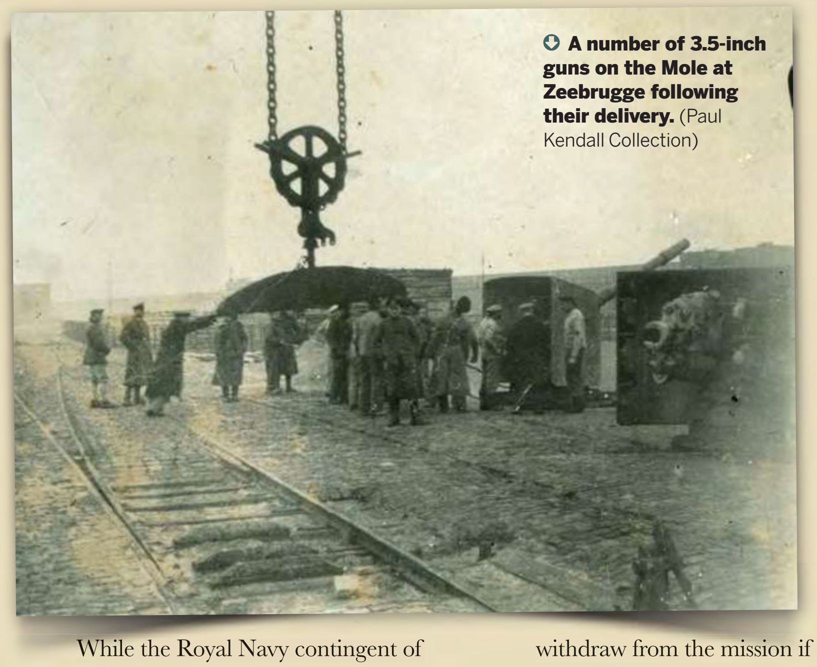


After the weeks of intensive training and the many days of refitting of the ships that were to assault Zeebrugge, the whole force had to be assembled in readiness to launch the raid as soon as tide and weather conditions permitted. The place chosen for this gathering was the Swin Deep, in the Thames Estuary. There, the men and ships from Chatham concentrated for the first time on 4 April 1918. 'The blockships and *Vindictive* steamed out to the loneliest of anchorages in the Swin Deep, situated about 8 miles south of Clacton, Essex,' wrote Captain Carpenter. 'It was a curious looking squadron that had steamed down the Medway that day, the blockships with their funnels looming extra-large in the absence of masts and the *Vindictive* with her gangways protruding into the mid-air like almonds in the side of a tipsy cake.'



German personnel at Zeebrugge during the First World War receiving one of the 3.5-inch guns which were mounted on the end of the Mole. (Paul Kendall Collection)





A number of 3.5-inch guns on the Mole at Zeebrugge following their delivery. (Paul Kendall Collection)

While the Royal Navy contingent of the operation was undergoing training at Chatham, the men were never told that the ships being prepared within the dockyard were connected with their mission. The reality, however, became apparent when the vessels anchored in the Swin. Petty Officer William O'Hara wrote: 'During the time of training, *Vindictive* and blockships were in Chatham being prepared but we never thought they were to take part in our enterprise as secret had it been kept. Our training finished we proceeded to Sheerness, there we saw the *Vindictive*, *Iris* and *Daffodil*; then we began to realise that they were to take part in our enterprise and we were then told the object of our attack.'

It was, as Petty Officer O'Hara said, that soon after gathering in the Swin, the men who had trained for several weeks were finally informed about their objective. After the hazardous nature of the operation had been revealed, some men were, perhaps surprisingly, given a final opportunity to withdraw from the mission if they felt inclined to do so, though, of course, none did.

Harry Adams recorded the moment when it was finally announced that they were to assault Zeebrugge: 'But at long last, they were ready for us to be told. Naturally the news spread like wildfire that we were to be let into the secret. All of us in turn were marshalled on a certain mess deck; different officers gave us lectures, we were shown maps, and enlarged photographs of the Mole and the German defences – Ugh!'

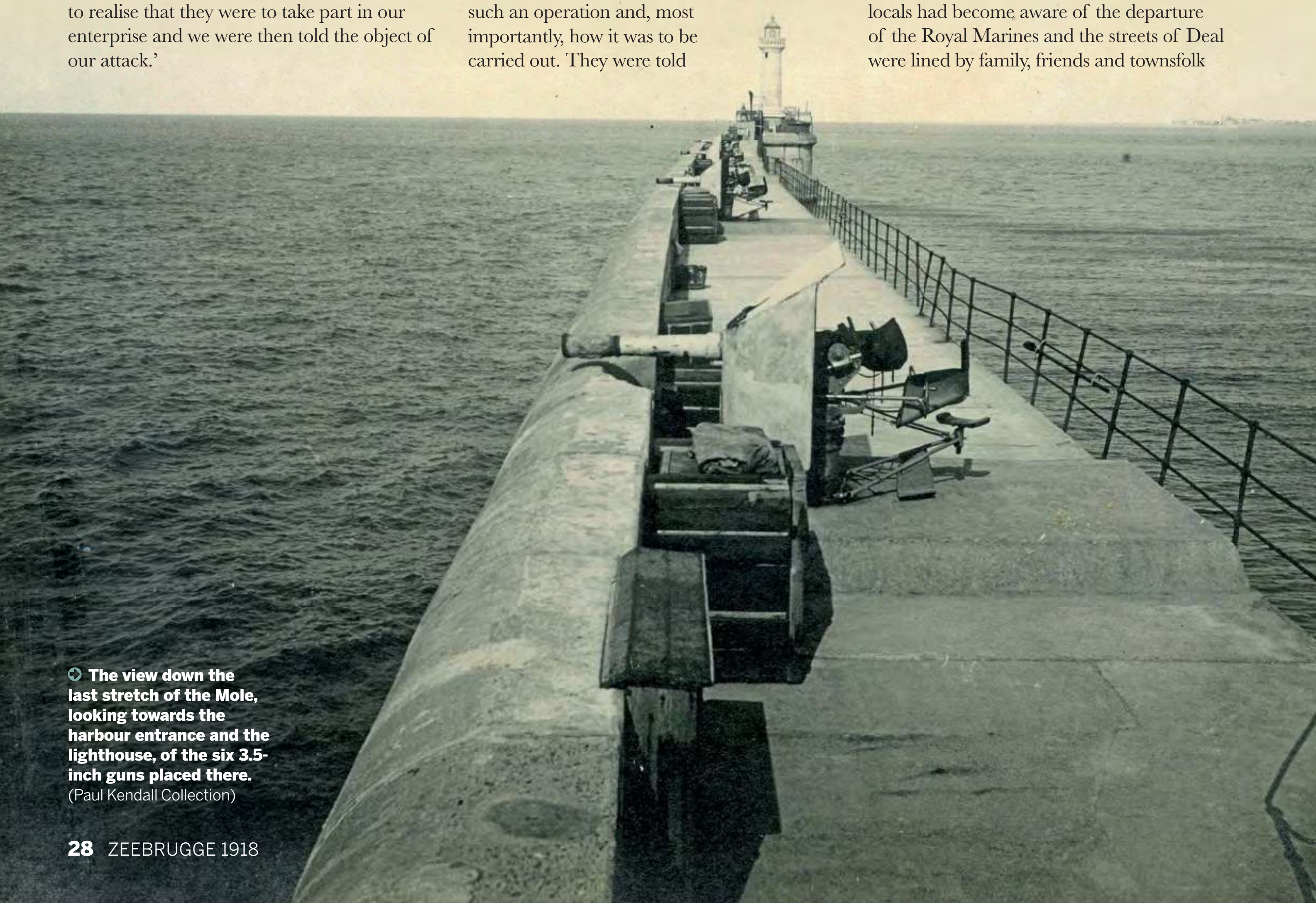
Everything was explained to the men; why they were being asked to undertake such an operation and, most importantly, how it was to be carried out. They were told how the blockships would sink themselves and how their crews would be picked up, if indeed there were any survivors from the point-blank fire they would be certain to encounter, and of the submarine loaded with five tons of explosives which would ram the viaduct and blow it to pieces to prevent reinforcements arriving from the shore. The men were told exactly what installations the demolition sections were to destroy i.e. the three batteries on the Mole, the light house on the sea-board end, cranes, different warehouses, stores, and so on, all of which had to be completed within an hour; and of the series of recalls that would be used to let them know the mission had been completed and that they should make their way back to their ships – if any were still afloat.

'We were told of that never to be forgotten wonderful "Smoke Screen" that was to play a most important part, and would be driven, we hoped, by the wind ahead of us all the time,' remembered Harry Adams, 'making it practically impossible for the German Gunners, to see through it'. Now the men knew just what they had let themselves in for.

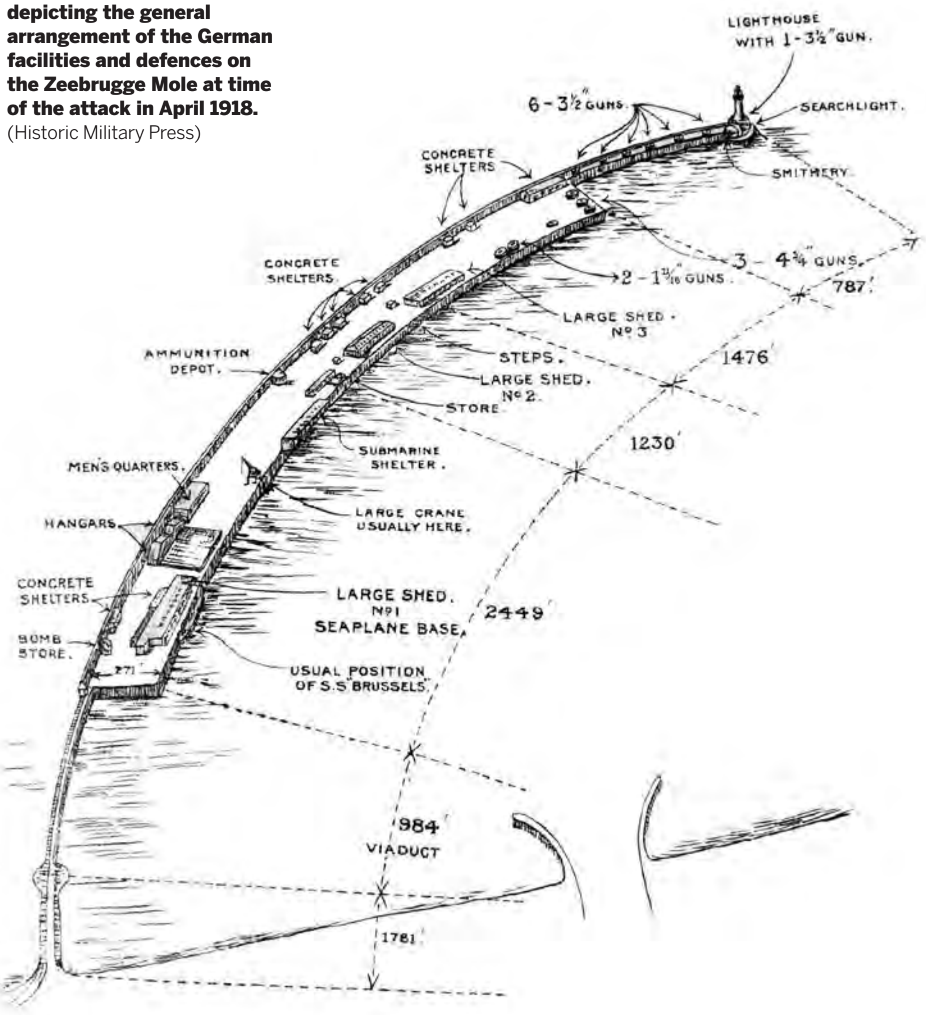
TELL IT TO THE MARINES

During the first two days that the assault fleet was anchored in the Swin, the crews of the vessels and the Royal Navy storming party spent the time left practising to land men. Then, on 6 April, the Marines arrived from Deal to complete the assault force.

Surprisingly, or perhaps unsurprisingly, the locals had become aware of the departure of the Royal Marines and the streets of Deal were lined by family, friends and townsfolk



The view down the last stretch of the Mole, looking towards the harbour entrance and the lighthouse, of the six 3.5-inch guns placed there. (Paul Kendall Collection)



A schematic drawing depicting the general arrangement of the German facilities and defences on the Zeebrugge Mole at time of the attack in April 1918. (Historic Military Press)

as the Marines headed for the train station. As the battalion marched out of the barracks the band played *Auld Lang Syne*, *The Girl I Left Behind Me* and *Rule Britannia*.

Sergeant Harry Wright recounted the moment the battalion departed: 'On April 6th, 1918, at 06:00 hours the battalion was paraded, and after being inspected by our Colonel we marched through the town to the station, preceded by the band. The people of Deal turned out en masse to give us a hearty send-off, and no one ever saw a happier crowd of men.'

The men may have been happy at the prospect of action, but, as Private James Feeney noticed, that was not the case with all of the onlookers: 'I never got a bit sentimental about this march to the railway station, until I saw a young, fair-haired woman run up to her husband and kiss him passionately. She was standing on the side of the road as I passed on. I saw her left hand clenched hard over her handkerchief, and the wedding ring looked new enough. She was biting her lip to try and hold the tension.'

The train carrying the Marines departed from Deal at 07.00 hours to make the relatively short journey to Dover. There the men embarked upon the steamer, and former River Clyde ferry, *King Edward*. Security was so rigid that *King Edward*'s captain was not informed of his destination until after the boat had left harbour. Sergeant Harry Wright wrote: 'In a short time we steamed into Dover, where a steamer was awaiting us. We soon embarked, and had strict orders to go down below. The captain of the steamer shouted from the bridge to our Colonel "Am I to proceed direct to France?" in reply the Colonel said: "Proceed to sea, and I will then give you your orders."'

When at sea the captain was given the sealed instructions. After breaking the seal and reading these he at once altered course and proceeded in the direction of Sheerness.

Eventually arriving in the Swin, *King Edward* went alongside HMS *Vindictive* and the Portsmouth and Plymouth companies clambered aboard the cruiser, the remainder of the Marines being placed on the old battleship *Commonwealth* which was being used as a temporary floating barracks.

Sergeant Harry Wright was one of those Marines who joined *Vindictive*, later admitting that he was 'astounded' by what he saw: 'There was a splendid deck built on the port side with ramps leading to it from the lower deck to starboard. On the port side were fourteen huge gangways pointing out to sea, and triced up with ropes and pulleys ready for dropping. The ship also carried two eleven-inch howitzers, one on the forecastle and the other on the quarter-deck, together with numerous Stokes guns and a pom-pom gun in the crow's-nest, half way up the mast. Sandbag revetments were built around the fore bridge and other vital parts. In addition, there were two very powerful flame-throwers and a number of machine guns. As regards ammunition the *Vindictive* was a floating arsenal, for there were shells of all sizes, ready fused, lying about everywhere.'

Once settled onboard the ships in the Swin, and isolated from civilization, the Royal Marines were, at last, also told the nature of the task ahead – that they were to land on Zeebrugge Mole. The job of explaining the operation to the other ranks was handed to Captain Carpenter, the troops being lined up on the quarterdeck of HMS *Vindictive*. 'We are going,' he said 'on a very dangerous errand, and any hitch in the operation may mean a naval disaster, as it is everyone's duty to do his best. The *Vindictive* is going through the enemy's mine-fields and alongside the Mole at Zeebrugge. On getting there the Royal Marines will storm the Mole and engage the enemy, while at the same time three blockships, filled with concrete, will go round the other side of the Mole and sink themselves in the mouth of the canal. A bridge connects the Mole with the town of Zeebrugge, and during the operation a submarine filled with ten tons of high explosives will be set to explode under this bridge and so cut off reinforcements from Zeebrugge. While all this is going on, two other ships will proceed to Ostend and sink themselves in the mouth of the canal there.'

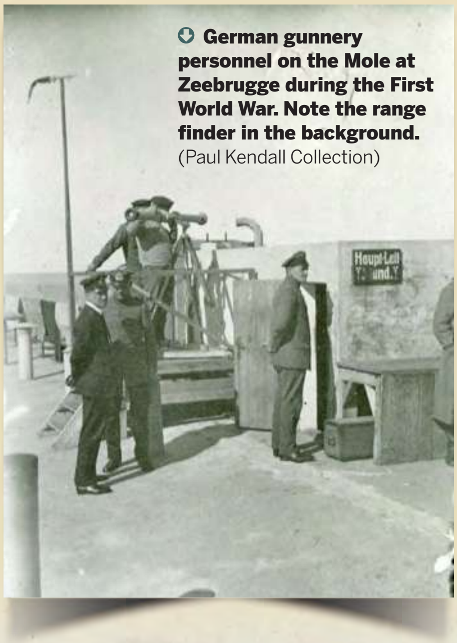
Another view of the delivery of the 3.5-inch guns underway at Zeebrugge. (Paul Kendall Collection)

After listening to the captain, the general opinion of the men was that they would be 'either completely successful or we shall be wiped out'.

THE DETAIL

As the exact role of the Marines was spelt out in detail, one platoon at a time was taken by their officer to be shown a clay model of the Mole. The original Mole was 1,800 yards long and eighty yards wide, having been built in peace-time to enable ships to land their passengers despite the shallow water inshore. Passengers could be landed on either side of the Mole, according to the tide, and there was a railway running the whole length of the structure to take them into Zeebrugge. On the sea-end of the Mole was a lighthouse.

Since it had been taken over by the Germans the Mole had been strongly fortified, which included a number of concrete shelters. There was a large aeroplane shed, harbouring six machines. About fifty yards from the lighthouse was a concrete shelter with four 5-inch guns and several machine-guns, and in various places along the Mole other machine-guns were hidden.



German gunnery personnel on the Mole at Zeebrugge during the First World War. Note the range finder in the background. (Paul Kendall Collection)

A German gunnery officer on the Mole at Zeebrugge prior to the attack in 1918. (Paul Kendall Collection)

The raiders were told that HMS *Vindictive* would go alongside the Mole, on the north side, and grappling-irons would be dropped onto the wall to keep her in place. The brows would then be lowered on to the concrete wall, and, at a given signal, the first company would land.

Lots were drawn to see who would land first, and that honour fell to Plymouth's 'C' Company. Each company had four platoons, and upon landing, the first two platoons of 'C' Company would turn right and capture the first objective, which was supposed to be a strong point 200 yards along the Mole. Immediately afterwards the other two platoons were to land and turn to the left and capture four 5-inch guns.

At the same time, if the enemy extinguished the lighthouse, they would light a flare so that the blockships could get their bearings. On reaching their positions the platoon sergeants of the leading platoons were to fire red Verey lights into the air as a signal for the next company to come on shore, in this case Portsmouth Marines. These men would land, and pass through 'C' Company, carrying the objectives to a depth of eight hundred yards. When they, in turn, fired their red lights, the Chatham Marines, would pass through the others already in position on the Mole and carry objectives to a depth of one mile.

The signal to retire was to be a succession of short blasts on *Vindictive*'s siren. The Chatham Marines would then retire first, followed by the Portsmouth Marines and the Plymouth Company, who would go last, with the wounded and dead being taken on board first.

Each platoon was armed with a Lewis gun and flame-thrower. There was also a special platoon of machine-gunners, a signal platoon with telephones, and demolition party for blowing up the concrete shelters and sheds. Each man carried hand-grenades, and every NCO had a stunning-mallet for close fighting. The officers were armed with revolvers and canes weighted at the handle-end with lead. Each platoon had two ladders and four ropes, as there would be a big drop of four feet from the gangways to the concrete wall, and from this ledge there was a sheer drop of twenty feet. Each man had an India-rubber swimming belt under his tunic in case he fell into the sea during the landing. The demolition parties (chiefly sailors) carried ammonal, gun cotton, safety and instantaneous fuses, and detonators.

During the landing *Vindictive* was to provide covering fire and monitors at sea would also try to silence the shore batteries at Zeebrugge.

Now, fully informed and thoroughly trained, all the men could do was wait. ◉

Some of the defenders that the men waiting in the Swin in the Thames Estuary would soon be facing – German naval personnel or marines parading on the Mole at Zeebrugge. (Paul Kendall Collection)

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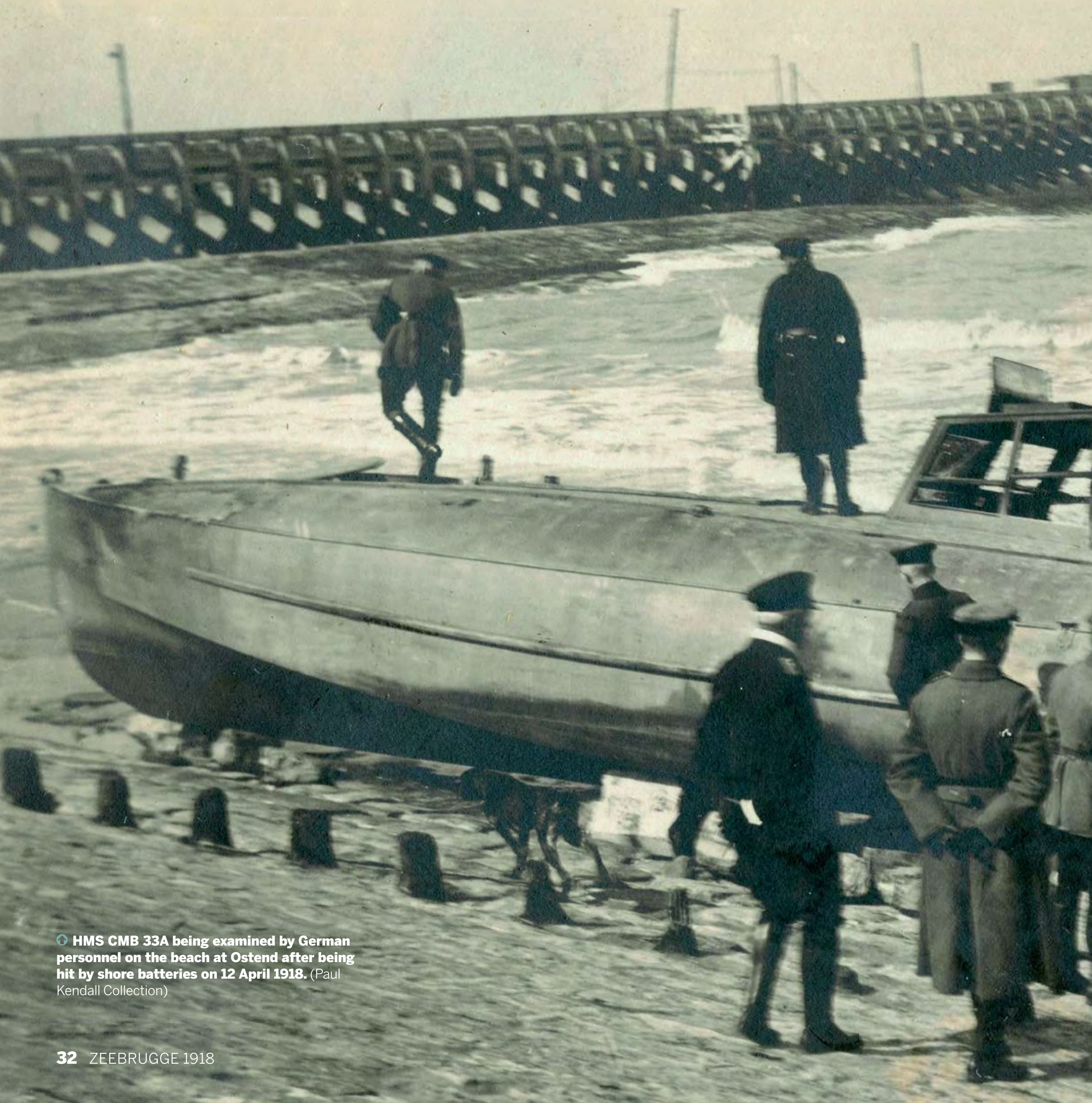
Failure and Frustration

Time and time again the operations against Zeebrugge and Ostend were cancelled due to adverse weather conditions.



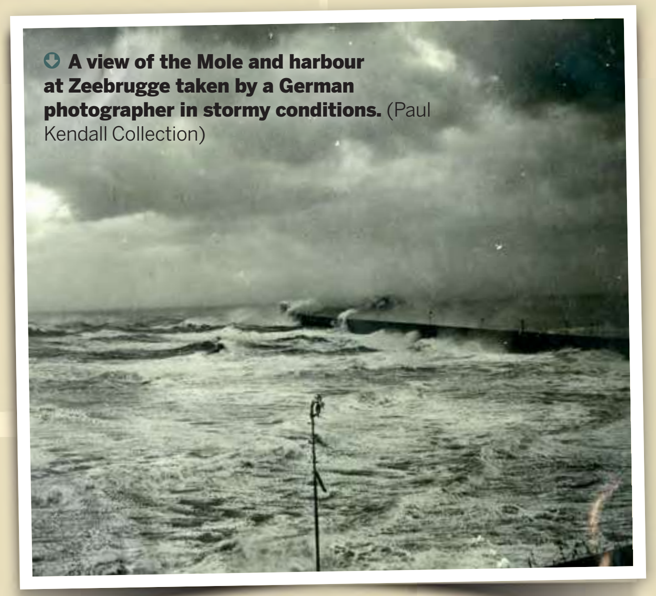
HMS CMB 33A being examined by German personnel on the beach at Ostend after being hit by shore batteries on 12 April 1918. (Paul Kendall Collection)

What the crews in the Swin Deep were waiting for, was for high tide on the Belgian coast to coincide with the hours of darkness and for the right weather conditions. The first could be accurately calculated months in advance, but the latter changed from day to day – even from hour to hour. Keyes could, therefore only plan for the tide and hope that the weather would be suitable. What would be considered suitable would be calm seas, an absence of fog and a favourable wind direction. The date for the raid was fixed for 9 April, hoping that the weather would be kind.

That afternoon, those Marines and sailors who had been accommodated on HMS *Commonwealth* and the old battleship *Hindustan* were taken to the raiding ships and, when all was ready, the flotilla set off towards the sea. To save on coal, *Iris and Daffodil* were taken in tow by *Vindictive* as it steamed down the Medway. It was dark by the time they reached the open water.

Conditions were not good, and after an hour of steaming, Keyes reluctantly signalled the cancellation of the operation, the seas proving too rough, the wind direction also having changed. Everyone was bitterly disappointed, and the next day the men were back where they had begun. 'Nerves, were just about at breaking strain,' recalled Harry Adams. 'But worse was to come.'

By this Adams meant that the tension continued to mount as the operation was repeatedly re-scheduled. The next of these was on 10 April. The men again left their accommodation ships to embark upon the raiding vessels, but the wind continued to be far too strong and the raid was aborted before the ships even left the Swin.



A view of the Mole and harbour at Zeebrugge taken by a German photographer in stormy conditions. (Paul Kendall Collection)

Another attempt was made to attack Zeebrugge on the following night, 11 April, about which Air Mechanic William Gough wrote: ‘On the second attempt the general feeling was a great desire to get the job over and done with, but between these two abortive attempts, there had been time to think over things and when we finally set out, we felt anything but ready for heroics. Nevertheless, we were determined to do our best.’

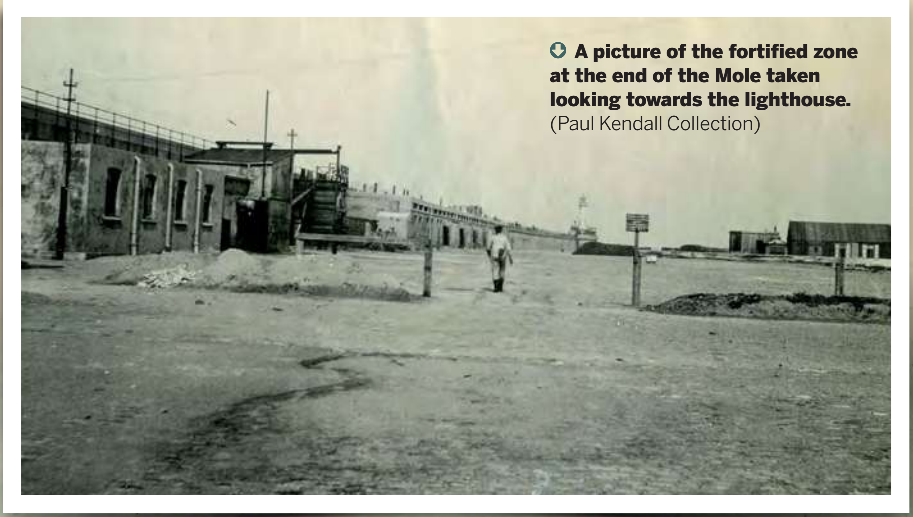
Unfortunately, during the passage across the Channel, the wind yet again changed, as Captain Arthur Chater related: ‘On 11th April we transferred to *Vindictive* at 1.30 pm, and sailed at 4 pm. All that evening the great armada was on its way, with hundreds on board, keyed-up for the great moment: but at 12.45 am (12th April) when we could see the flashes of our bombs and shells bursting on Zeebrugge, the wind changed, and the Admiral decided to call off the attack.’

The sea was certainly very rough that night. ‘We plodded on through the early part of that night, the weather really became wicked,’ recalled Adams, ‘the *Daffodil*, being a flat-bottomed boat, all but turned turtle, not once but many times. The very tug of her towing wire as she dipped and rolled, threw you off your feet – tables and stools thrown everywhere.’

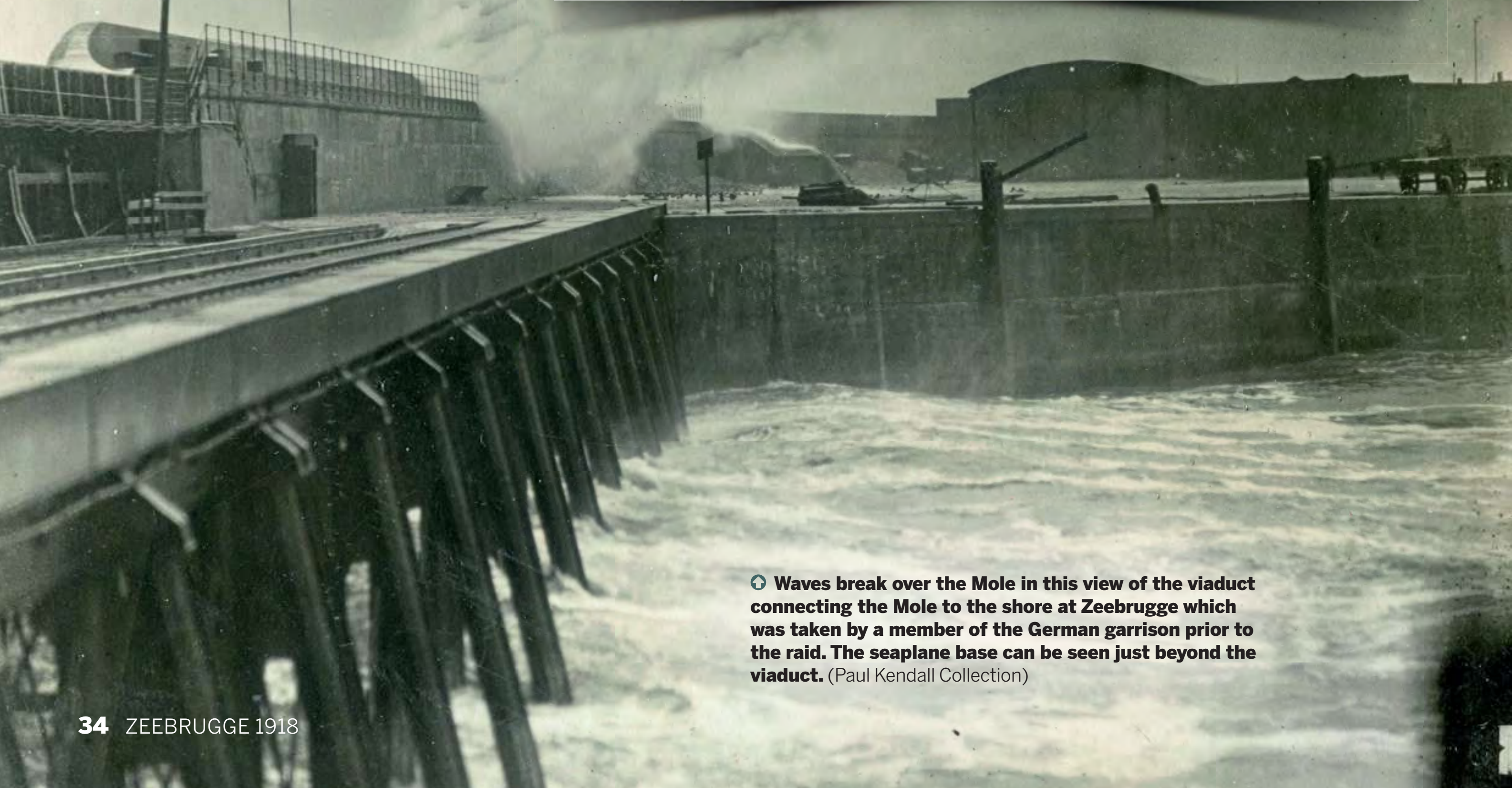
It was a hard decision for Keyes to make with the preliminary bombardment of Zeebrugge having already commenced and the ships being within sight of the enemy coast, especially as he had to turn around seventy-four vessels in difficult conditions and hope there were no collisions in the dark. ‘I knew that every man in the expedition felt, as I did, keyed up for the ordeal,’ wrote Keyes. ‘How they would hate to be called off and then asked to undergo it all over again – or perhaps, worse still, have to go back to their ships having achieved nothing.’

Later, when the ships were back in the Swin, Keyes felt it was his duty to explain his decision to the men, which was recorded by Sergeant Harry Wright: ‘“Well, men,” he said, “I am very sorry you were disappointed last night. In the first place, the wind changed at the last moment, making our smoke-screen useless. Secondly, through the bombardment, the Germans had an idea that something was going to happen and would have been prepared for us.

“Zeebrugge itself is bristling with guns, and had we attempted to land last night it might easily have proved a disaster. To test the accuracy of the German gunfire one of our ships sent out a wireless message. The Germans found her position and range by the sound of the wireless and dropped a shell close by her. Have patience men; I can promise you a successful operation.”’



A picture of the fortified zone at the end of the Mole taken looking towards the lighthouse. (Paul Kendall Collection)



Waves break over the Mole in this view of the viaduct connecting the Mole to the shore at Zeebrugge which was taken by a member of the German garrison prior to the raid. The seaplane base can be seen just beyond the viaduct. (Paul Kendall Collection)

A German naval or marine band pictured beside some of the buildings in the fortified zone on Zeebrugge Mole. (Paul Kendall Collection)

It was later said that it was fortunate that the mission had been cancelled, because the captain of HMS *Vindictive* had announced that before the ship reached the Mole, a double tot of rum would be issued to all hands. As the operation was one in which all would need clear heads and steady hands and feet, many felt this to be a mistake; but there was no going back on such a promise to men about to go into possibly the most dangerous few hours of their lives. There were also problems on *Thetis* where some men raided the spirit room and broached the rum cask. These men were soon incapable of even helping aboard the ship. No spirits would be taken on the next attempt – at least one good lesson had been learnt.

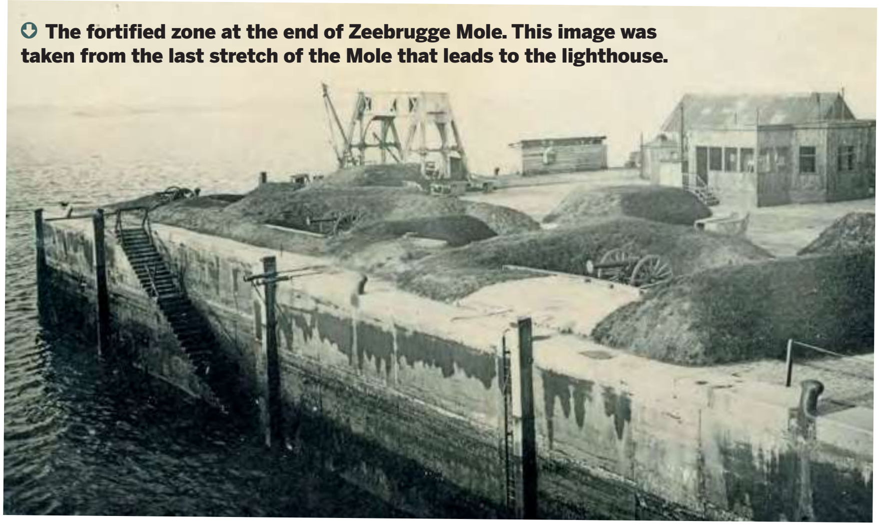
ENEMY FORE KNOWLEDGE

As it transpired, the signal to retire had not been received by all the vessels. Six CMBs designated for the attack upon Ostend carried out their orders at 01.00 hours, and began laying their smoke screens, with CMB 33A, commanded by Lieutenant Robert Angus RNR, deploying its smoke screen close to the eastern pier. Lieutenant F. Harrison, commanding the Ostend units, reported: 'The enemy fired star shells almost on the arrival of CMBs at Stroom Buoy. They opened fire from the forts on what appeared to be a barrage system and kept it up intermittently during the whole operation. Shrapnel was bursting over the inshore boats most of the time.'

At 01.20 hours, CMB 33A was last observed approaching the pier. Nothing was seen of her again – at least by her own side. No carrier pigeons or messages were received from the vessel.

It was subsequently learnt that during the night CMB 33A entered the entrance to Ostend harbour and fired its machine-guns at the searchlight on the pier. The German gunners responded quickly and scored a direct hit on the British boat. After being hit by enemy fire, 33A ran aground in Ostend harbour, all six crew being killed.

It was suspected (and after the war proven to be the case) that the Germans captured this vessel. Worryingly, onboard were detailed documents relating to the raids on Zeebrugge and Ostend, Lieutenant Angus having failed to comply with orders not to leave any important documents on board.



The fortified zone at the end of Zeebrugge Mole. This image was taken from the last stretch of the Mole that leads to the lighthouse.

There were now genuine fears that the Germans would be on their guard against a raid upon the Belgian ports and, after three aborted attempts, the Admiralty wanted to abandon the operation on the grounds of cost and the probability that secret operation was no longer a secret. In fact, Admiral Wemyss advised Keyes, on the latter's return, that the operation should be cancelled, and the raiding force disbanded.

The grave of Lieutenant Robert Angus RNR, of HMS CMB 33A, in Coxyde Military Cemetery in De Panne, near the French-Belgian border. His body was washed ashore on the beaches nearby. (Historic Military Press)

After so much effort had gone into the operation, Wemyss was persuaded to allow Keyes to continue with the raid, the latter stating that he would be able to make another attempt in ten days' time. This followed a visit to the officers and the men by Keyes to ascertain their mood, which was still surprisingly buoyant. The First Sea Lord, Admiral Eric Geddes, also visited the ships and all those he spoke to said they were keen to go on.

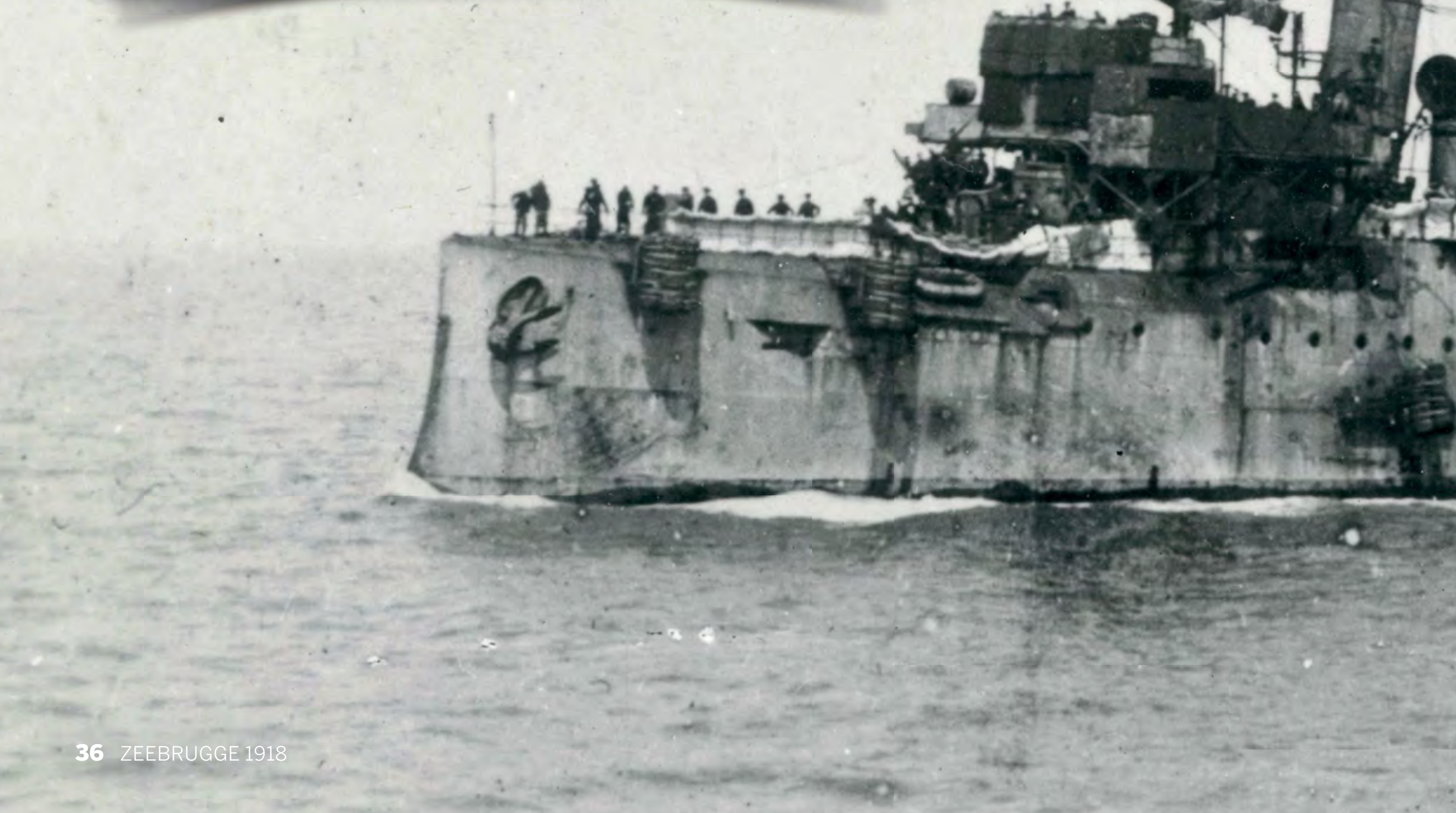
This, though, meant keeping the men confined to the ship during this period, adding fuel to their already vividly burning imaginations. 'All we knew and saw, were guns, waiting to blow you to bits and the ensuing days were really days of waiting for your death,' wrote Henry Adams. 'About the nearest approach I should say, to a man in the Condemned Cell.' ◉

Twisting The Dragon's Tail

At last the weather was favourable and the raiding force finally set off across the North Sea. The date for the attack was 23 April – St George's Day.

A few of the German defenders at Zeebrugge – seamen or marines on the Mole. (Paul Kendall Collection)

The moment of departure – HMS *Vindictive* pictured 'leaving for Zeebrugge' on 22 April 1918. (Paul Kendall Collection)



Admiral Keyes had scheduled the next attempt upon Zeebrugge and Ostend for the night of 22/23 April and, to ensure that the ships arrived at Zeebrugge at high tide at midnight it was necessary to leave the Thames Estuary around midday and sail across the North Sea in broad daylight. This meant that there was a very real risk that the British flotilla would be spotted, thereby losing the element of surprise.

Unlike the two previous occasions, this time there were no jubilant cheers from the support vessels as the flotilla set sail from the Swin and the mood amongst the raiders was equally downbeat, as Air Mechanic William Gough, onboard HMS *Vindictive*, recalled: 'Contrary to what might be expected, there was no undue show of expectancy or excitement. This was due partly to the fact that twice before – on the 10 and 13 – an attempt had been made and abandoned owing to unfavourable weather conditions and partly because everyone felt that, assuming the stunt came off, there was about a thousand to one chance of the *Vindictive* ever getting home again.'

Harry Adams recalled that the departure of *Daffodil* from the Swin was a somewhat subdued affair: 'Then came the 22nd of April, 1918. Taking all things into consideration, it seemed we should really set out once more. It had become quite a routine by this time, this going and coming back sort of thing.

'However, we went very quietly this time, and, for no reason whatsoever, the atmosphere seemed dead. The excitement of going, and being cheered on our way, seemed a thing of the past. In fact, I can truthfully say that only those, whose very presence was actually required on the upper deck of the *Hindustan*, saw us leave on that last and final run.

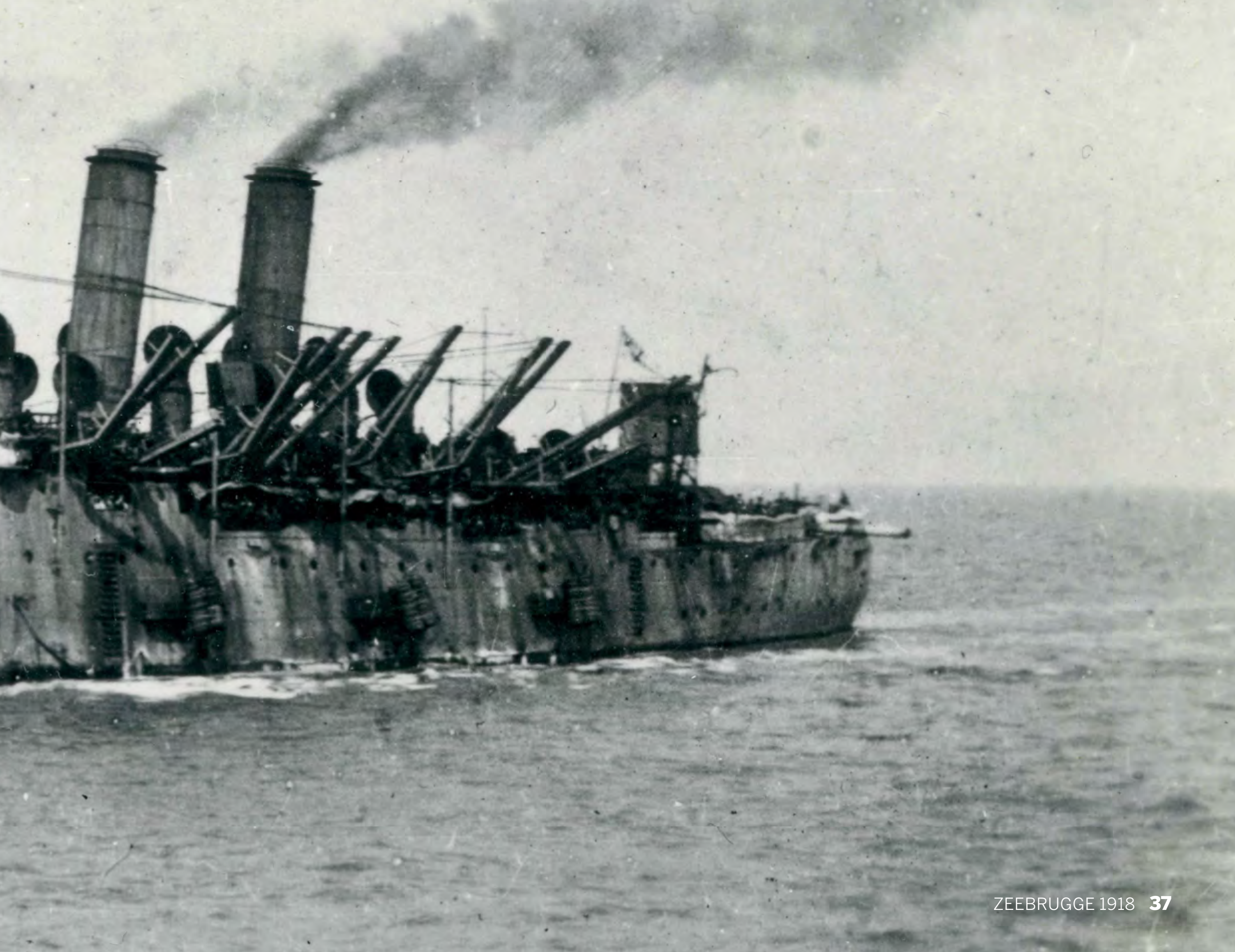
'Not a cheery farewell from a soul and so we again manned our ships, weighed, and set off downstream – that peculiar fleet of proud old crocks almost giddy by this time with so many turning of 16 points – they seemed almost as fed up as the officers and men who manned them. But this hour of supreme triumph was at last in sight as we plodded on and made for the open sea.'

This time, conditions seemed almost ideal. The sea was calm with just a slight swell and a gentle northerly breeze of about six miles per hour. *Iris* and *Daffodil* left the anchorage at about 12.30 hours and proceeded to the East Margate Buoy. At 13.10 hours *Vindictive* and the blockships moved off, arriving off the East Margate Buoy at 15.40 hours.

Wing Commander Brock was already there, having embarked on the destroyer HMS *Whirlwind*. There was, however, no real reason for him to participate in the operation, but he was determined to go. Keyes had agreed, with great reluctance, to allow Brock, who was the only person who truly understood the scientific practicalities of the application of the smoke apparatus, to take part in the actual attack. Brock was considered a genius by his peers and it would be disastrous to lose such a great mind, but intelligence reports had identified that a number of unexplained metal tubes had been placed on the Mole by the Germans. These were thought to be part of an enemy device used for sound-ranging for shore batteries. These metal tubes had to be investigated during the raid and Brock was the only suitable person of a scientific background available to carry out the inspection.

The submarines *C1* and *C3* left Dover at 13.30 hours. Fifteen minutes later HMS *Trident* took *C3* in tow, while HMS *Mansfield* took *C1* in tow, all four vessels then moved out into the Channel.

Meanwhile, the flotilla of blockships and ferry boats, led by *Vindictive*, made its way towards Dover where it established contact with the flagship, HMS *Warwick*, carrying Vice-Admiral Keyes and the remainder of the assault force, at 16.53 hours. Now complete, the force set off for the Belgian coast.



An early photograph of a German field gun pictured in the fortified zone at the end of the Mole at Zeebrugge. (Paul Kendall Collection)

Two more views of field guns positioned in the fortified zone at the end of the Mole. (Both Paul Kendall Collection)

Private Philip Hodgson, serving with the RMLI's No.12 Platoon of 'C' Company, recalled the impressive sight of the vessels of all descriptions sailing across the North Sea: 'It was a fine spring afternoon, when we set off. *Vindictive* with *Iris* and *Daffodil* in tow to save their limited supply of fuel followed in line ahead by the old gun boats, to become blockships, *Thetis*, *Iphigenia* and *Intrepid* sailing down outside the Goodwins to our rendezvous off Dover with the remainder of the attacking force consisting of lines of destroyers and MLs with their special smoke generators. It was indeed a thrilling sight to see this armada of small ships sailing in perfect order in an almost calm sea as the sun set and darkness fell.'

There were, as Able Seaman Thomas Bradley aboard *Daffodil* recalled, immediate dangers to be faced:'We had not been out long before we were ordered to put our lifebelts on, as there were minefields to be crossed, we obeyed orders, adjusted our bandoliers, cutlasses, revolvers and belts.'

Keyes himself later described the flotilla: 'On leaving the Goodwins the Main Force was disposed in three columns. The centre column was led by *Vindictive* with *Iris* and *Daffodil* in tow, followed by the five blocking ships and the paddle minesweeper *Lingfield* escorting five motor launches for taking off surplus steaming parties of the blocking ships.

'The starboard column was led by the *Warwick* flying my flag, followed by the *Phoebe* and *North Star*, with which three ships were to cover the *Vindictive* from torpedo attack while storming operations were in progress; *Trident* and *Mansfield*, towing submarines *C3* and *C1*; and *Tempest*, to escort the two Ostend blockships.

'The port columns were led by *Whirlwind*, followed by *Myngs* and *Moorson* which were to patrol to northward of Zeebrugge; and the *Tetrarch*, also to escort the Ostend blockships. Every craft was towing one or more coastal motor boats, and between the columns were motor launches.'

Private 'Beau' Tracey, who was aboard *Iris*, remembered the moment as he looked over in the direction of HMS *Warwick* as the latter flew the Vice-Admiral's flag. This had come from the battleship HMS *Centurion*, which Keyes commanded during 1916-17, meaning that a large battleship flag was being flown from the mast of a much smaller destroyer. It was, Tracey mused, a truly impressive sight: 'It gave one a certain degree of pride to be able to look in that direction and see that massive Admiral's flag.'

Realising that when they landed on the Mole it would be St. George's Day, Vice-Admiral Keyes sent the following signal from *Warwick* to *Vindictive*: 'St. George for England'. To this Captain Carpenter replied: 'May we give the dragon's tail a damned good twist.'

Lance Corporal George Calverley, aboard *Iris*, recalled: 'We proceeded slowly and it appeared that we were waiting for the cover of darkness to settle upon us and just as it was getting dusk, Admiral Keyes, the inaugurator of the raid, sailed through the lines of the

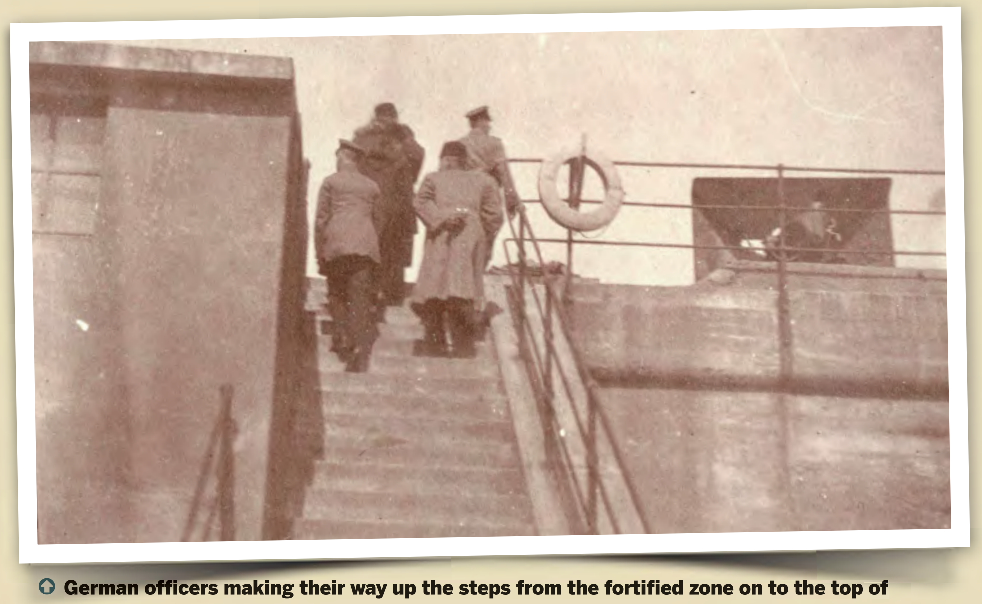
A pair of German U-boats pictured in Zeebrugge Harbour, near the Mole, during the First World War. (Paul Kendall Collection)

destroyer *Warwick*. As Lord Nelson had made the signal at Trafalgar that "England expects that every man will do his duty", Admiral Keyes signalled "Saint George for England".

‘It was only then that I realised that the date was 22nd April, and that St. George's Day would commence at midnight. It almost looked as if the raid had been chosen purposely and not by the state of the tides. Gradually darkness enclosed us, not a speck of light to be seen anywhere ahead and we must be nearing the Belgian coast.'

BLOOD ON THE DECKS

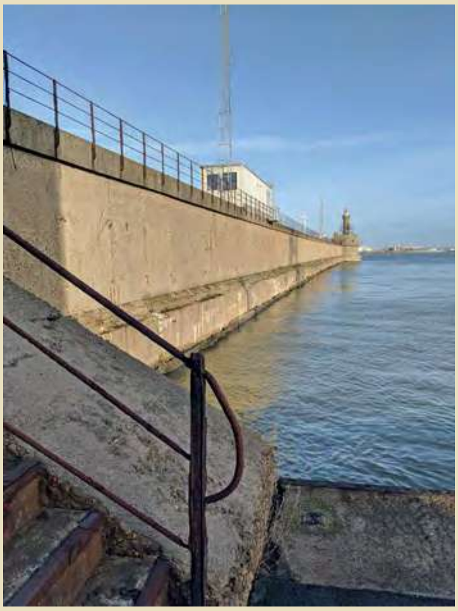
As the ships continued across the North Sea, the weather remained calm and, increasingly, the men began to realise that, at last, it appeared that the raid really was going to happen that night. ‘As the hours went by the conditions gradually became most promising and the conviction grew that the Huns we were visiting would have no sleep that night,' Lieutenant F.J. Hore later wrote. ‘We were under no delusion as to our mission. Everyone knew he was in for a tough job, but all were in the highest spirits.'



German officers making their way up the steps from the fortified zone on to the top of the last section of the Mole parapet at Zeebrugge, this being the part of the Mole on which the 3.5-inch guns were located. These steps, as well as the last stretch of the Mole leading to the lighthouse, have survived the many phases of redevelopment in the harbour since the end of the First World War. (Paul Kendall Collection)

The question that crossed most minds as they drew nearer to Zeebrugge was whether the Germans knew that they were coming? Harry Adams contemplated this aboard *Daffodil*: ‘Was it too much, to even hope that the Germans couldn't possibly have got wind of our coming? Seemed almost ridiculous this being the third try, to even waste time hoping – in any case by this time, we were past caring whether they knew or not. We wanted to get on with the job.'

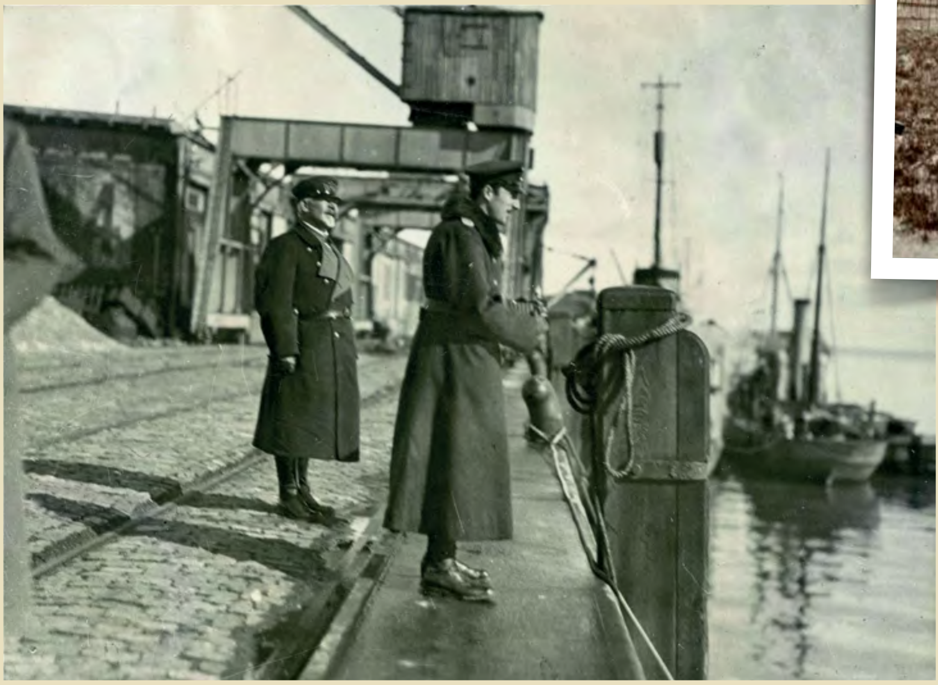
Another view of the fortified zone at the end of the Mole, with the lighthouse in the distance. Small sections of the paved surface that can be seen in the foreground of this picture still survive on the Mole to this day. (Paul Kendall Collection)



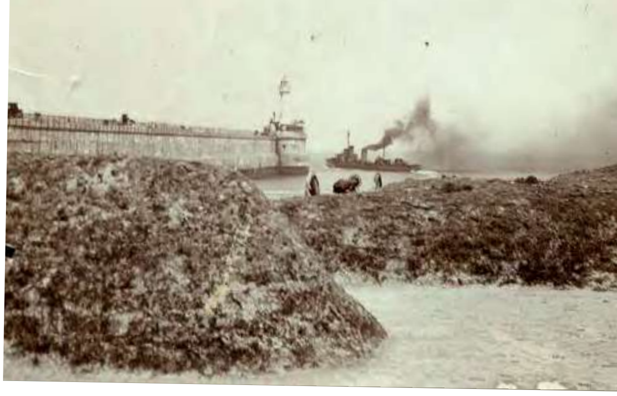
A view of the surviving stretch of the original Mole, with the lighthouse in the distance. In the immediate foreground is the same set of steps that appear in the image on the left. (Historic Military Press)

Keyes, however, was still confident that the Germans defending Zeebrugge were not aware that they were sailing towards them: ‘The concentration of the attacking fleet had to take place between 63 miles distant from Zeebrugge and Ostend. As the length of time needed for reaching these objectives after the forces had been assembled was seven hours, it was inevitable that there should be a period of not less than four hours of daylight during which enemy observation by air and submarine might discover our movements. In order to guard against this, which would have meant the certain failure of the expedition, it was necessary for the patrols and air forces to show the utmost vigilance and energy.' Though little consideration is given to the aerial aspect of the raid, it was, as Keyes pointed out, of the utmost importance, and will be dealt with in detail later.

A German U-boat approaches the Mole at Zeebrugge, with a least one torpedo-boat alongside the latter, prior to the St George's Day Raid. (Paul Kendall Collection)



Admiral Ludwig von Schröder (foreground) on the Mole. Schröder was commander of the Marinekorps Flandern. The bollards on the Mole edge can still be seen. (Paul Kendall Collection)



A German torpedo-boat heads out to sea from the harbour at Zeebrugge during the First World War, passing the end of the Mole as it does so. Note the gun in the fortified zone in the foreground. (Paul Kendall Collection)

German gun crews at their 3.5-inch guns mounted on the end of the Mole. (Paul Kendall Collection)

Learning from the experiences of the previous attempts, greater care was taken on this passage to ensure that the men received only their allocated rum ration and that it was not exceeded. Sergeant Harry Wright, aboard *Vindictive*, remembered that, 'The daily ration of rum was issued to the men about 8.00 pm, and the platoon sergeants were made responsible that each man only had his share. What was over was emptied away.'

On *Iris* there were just two issues of rum throughout the passage, with each man's name being ticked off on a crew list. Every man had to drink his allocated allowance of rum – tea-totaller or not – no-one being permitted to hand theirs to anyone else. Nevertheless, the alcohol had its effect and the men became more relaxed and mildly jovial.

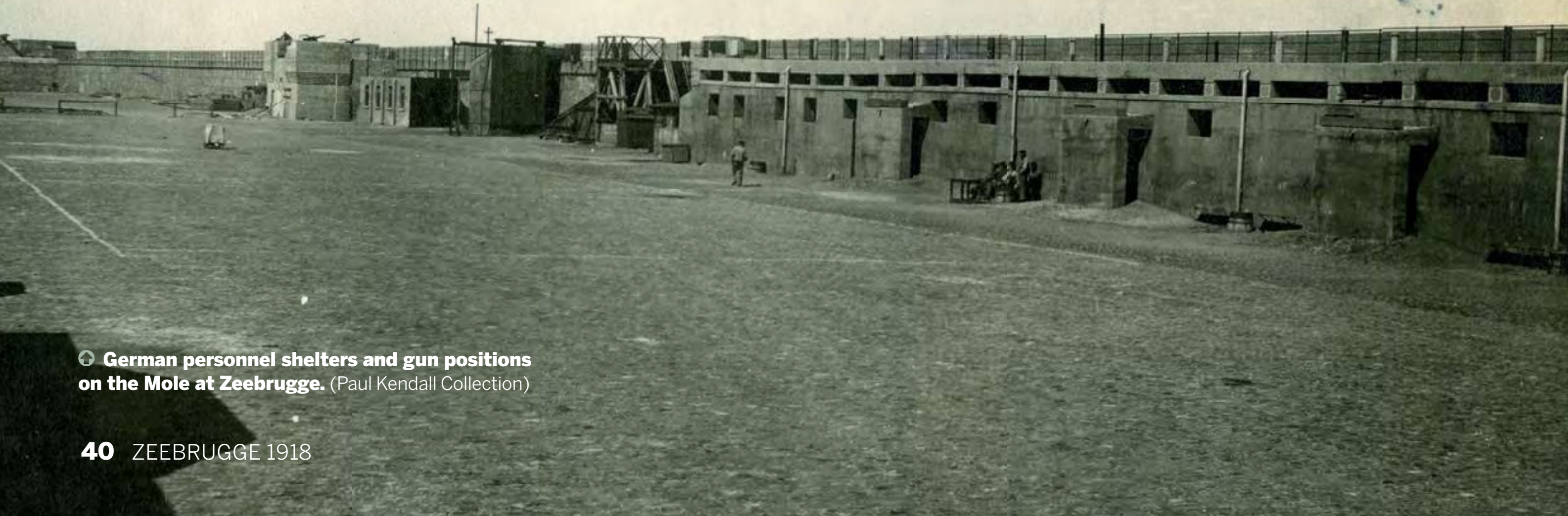
On board *Daffodil*, the men were inspected to ensure they had all their personal equipment at hand, especially the demolition parties. These men were armed with cutlasses and revolvers and had the gelignite they were to use, as well as the fuses and detonators, strapped to their bodies. They even had a piece of phosphor paper from a match box tied to their wrists to strike them on. Each man, mused Harry Adams, was 'a human arsenal'.

At 20.45 hours the flotilla halted at a designated rendezvous point where surplus blockship crewmen were transferred to the minesweeper HMS *Lingfield*. At Buoy D, located fifteen miles north-west of Zeebrugge Mole, the flotilla halted for a further ten minutes. At this point, *Iris* and *Daffodil* cast off from *Vindictive*, and from that moment on, all of the raiding vessels made their way to their destined targets under their own power and in total darkness without radio communication.

By 22.30 hours the fleet was just fifteen miles from Zeebrugge and the Ostend part of the force altered course for its destination. HMS *Warwick* continued to lead the main flotilla towards Zeebrugge.

As the flotilla continued its passage towards the Belgian coast, a myriad of last minute preparations were taking place. Aboard *Iris*, Air Mechanic George Warrington, who was in command of the Forward Mole Flamethrower Party, detailed to land in support of the Mole assault party, recalled one particularly sobering moment: 'No.1, Lieutenant Henderson, said to me, "PO get your men together and cover the top deck with sand." I asked him why, and he gave me a look of pity, and said, "Lad – it is to soak up the blood".'

German personnel pictured beside one of the six 3.5-inch guns at the end of Zeebrugge Mole. (Paul Kendall Collection)



German personnel shelters and gun positions on the Mole at Zeebrugge. (Paul Kendall Collection)

Lissewighe d 20.8 1915
Einweihung der
Elektr. Centrale
Filiale der
Zeebrügge
15000 Volt

A group of German personnel, presumably part of the garrison at Zeebrugge, photographed by a railway wagon in the harbour area during the First World War. (Paul Kendall Collection)

A member of the German garrison at Zeebrugge during the First World War pictured wearing a fur coat, tin helmet and gasmask. (Paul Kendall Collection)

THE SMOKE SCREEN

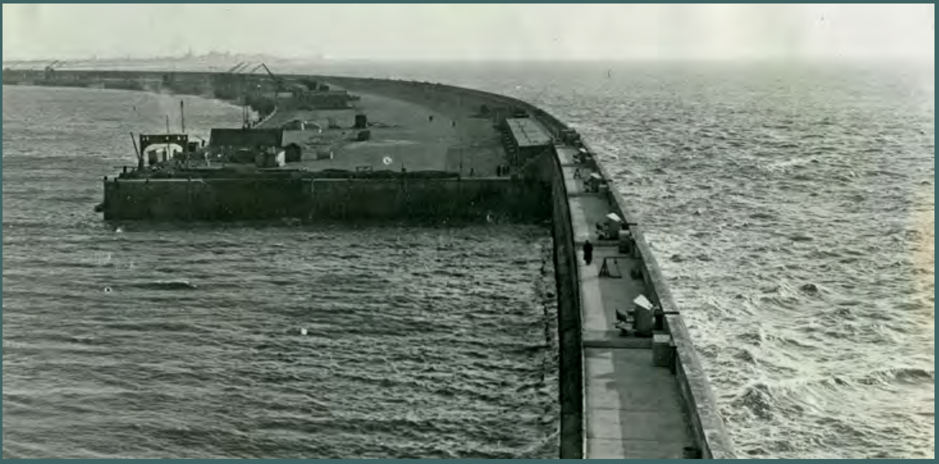
The smoke screening operation was scheduled to commence at 22.40 hours. Coastal motor boats from Unit A, CMB 17A and CMB 24A, were responsible for laying the central smoke screen across the path of the flotilla before it approached the Mole. However, CMB 17 experienced mechanical problems and did not arrive at the Mole until after midnight, which meant it was left to CMB 24A to lay most of this smoke screen alone.

The result was, despite the valiant efforts of CMB 24A's crew, that the smoke screen was not sufficient to conceal the approaching assault ships, as Lieutenant A.P. Welman reported: 'It was seen that smoke screen made by Unit A was not sufficiently thick to ensure *Vindictive* not being observed from shore batteries, as just at this time several shells were observed to straddle *Iris*. Accordingly, smoke cloud was commenced and continued across position of harbour entrance, when course was altered for centre of Mole. When it was considered that this position should have been reached it was not possible to ascertain the boat's position owing to thick smoke, and it appeared that position was too far to the westward.'

Though CMB 24A had been unable to hide the approach of the ships, Units V (CMB 22B and CMB 23B) and O (ML 265, ML 424, ML 552 and ML 558) were to lay smoke inside the harbour. Captain R. Collins, who commanded Unit O, later reported: 'When the blockships reduced speed, I gradually closed on *Vindictive*, passing *Iris* and *Daffodil*. There was a good screen about 600 yards from the Mole, and smoke floats had been laid right under the battery at the Mole Lighthouse.' The wind, though, had changed to the west and rather than blanketing the Mole, the smoke just drifted parallel to it.

Moments before *Vindictive* arrived at the Mole, the Monitors began their bombardment of Zeebrugge. Lieutenant Edward Hilton Young was a gunnery officer aboard *Vindictive*, commanding the forward 6-inch gun crew: 'From behind us and far away out to sea came a dull thud! thud! It was the great monitors waking Zeebrugge with their enormous shells. The attack had begun. It was tremendously hearty and encouraging to hear our own big guns opening the dance, and to think that we were getting all the help in our adventure that could be given us. Still a minute or two ticked away and nothing happened; still there might have been nothing but open sea ahead of us.'

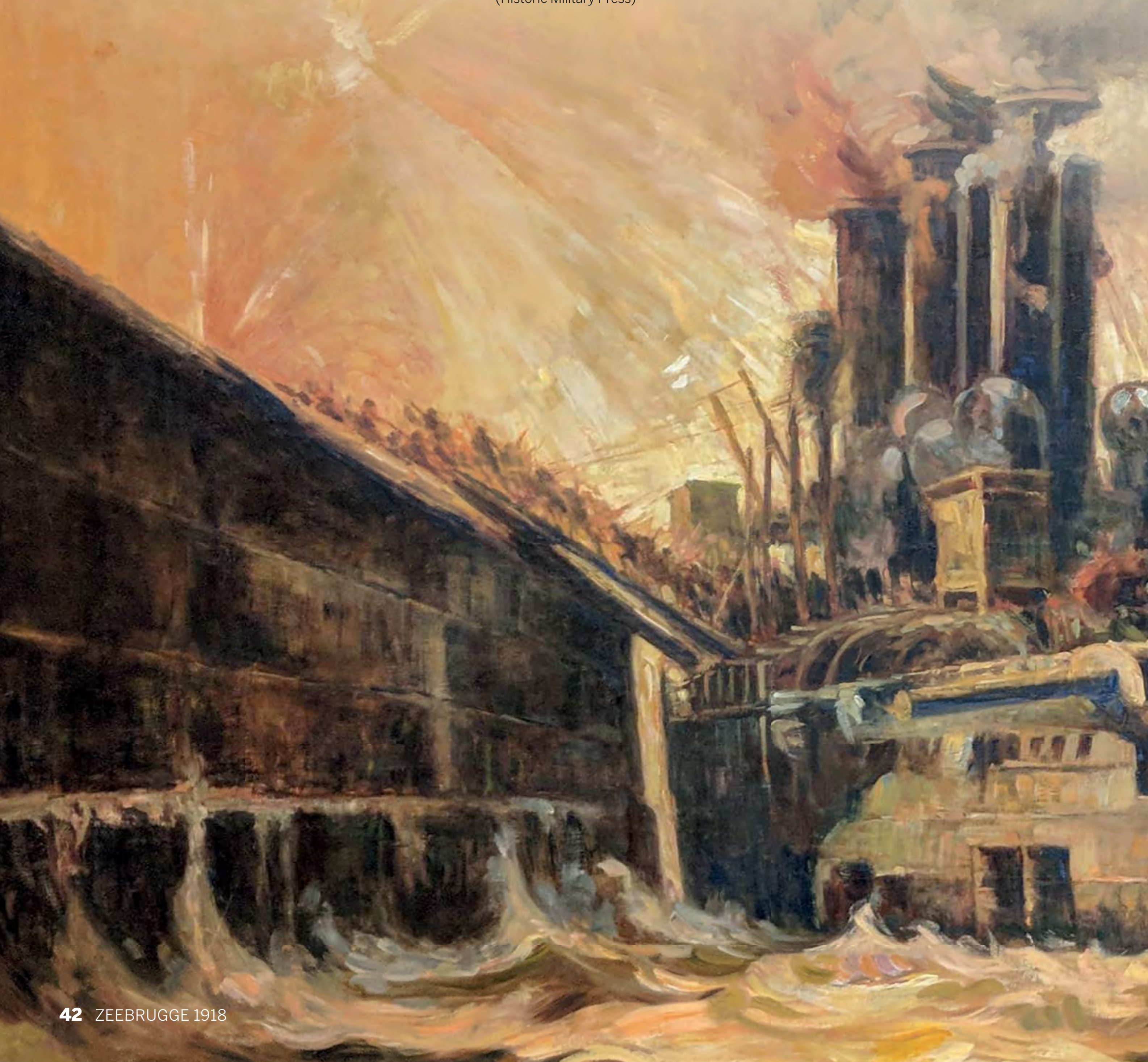
In fact, the guns of Zeebrugge were less than a mile away. All the ships had been in darkness until this moment, then the small craft turned on their navigational lights and white, green and red lights flashed on all around. The moment had finally arrived. ◉



Taken from the lighthouse at the end of the Mole during the First World War, this image shows the area of the fortified zone and last, narrow, stretch of the Mole with the gun positions on both clearly visible. (Paul Kendall Collection)

Dashing Into Danger

Amid a torrent of shot and shell the assault ships raced through the smoke screen to land the storming parties on the Zeebrugge Mole.



A painting of the attack on Zeebrugge underway on the night of 22/23 April 1918. Here HMS *Vindictive* is depicted coming alongside the Mole, with *Daffodil* working beside her. This painting hangs in the Town Hall in Zeebrugge. (Historic Military Press)

Thanks to the smokescreen laid by the coastal motor boats, *Vindictive* steamed towards Zeebrugge harbour still undetected by the Germans. The men manning *Vindictive*'s guns had been told not to open fire until fired upon by the enemy so as to not reveal the ship's presence prematurely, but the bombardment by the monitors had alerted the German gunners and they fired star shells to try and illuminate the harbour approaches.

'Suddenly, all around appeared light from hundreds of searchlights and flares,' recalled Air Mechanic William Gough on *Vindictive*'s upper deck, 'and then we could see that our destroyers and motor launches had been carrying out their part of the programme. All around lying close to the water was a solid bank of artificial fog illuminated from the shore by the searchlights, with which the Germans were trying vainly to locate us. It was an awe-inspiring site.

'Still, we went on giving no sign. Then the Germans tried other means of penetrating our protective covering of fog. One after another, star shells burst into flame so near to us that for some time we thought that they had actually found us, and every moment we expected the comparatively harmless star shells to be followed by others of a more-deadly nature.'

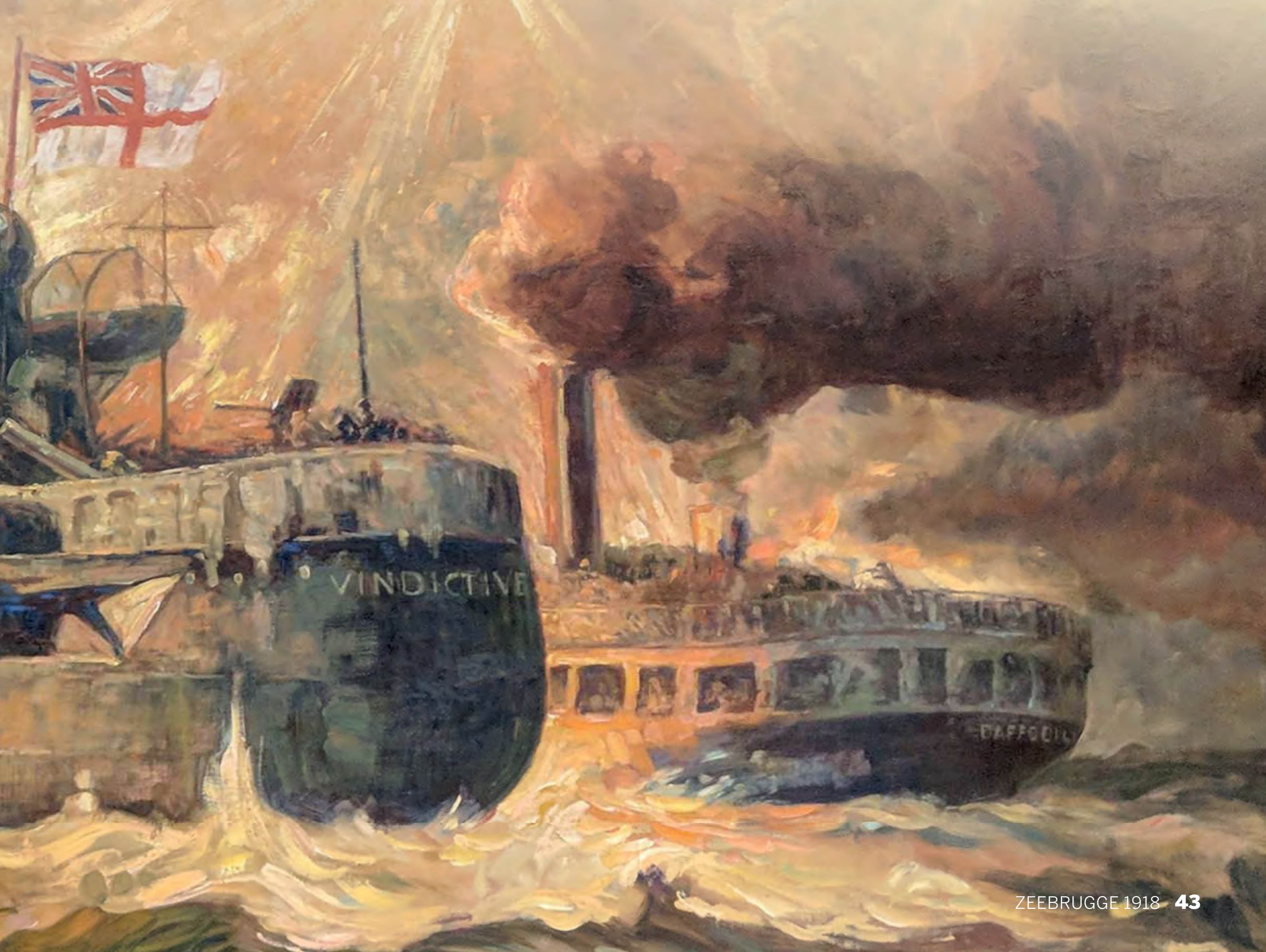
The star shells and flares actually made visibility even worse for the defenders, as Lieutenant Young observed: 'As each star shell fell into the smoke screen that now covered the sea, unless it was within a very few hundred yards of us, it was eclipsed as a star and became a large, vague nebula. Although then there was plenty of light about, a few hundred yards from the ship everything was blotted out in wreaths, eddies, and whirls of glowing vapour. The German gunners, I imagine, were peering into the vapour, unable to perceive any definite object in the shifting, dazzling glow, and wondering what in the name of goodness was going to come out of it. So we steamed on until we were some four hundred yards from the Mole.'

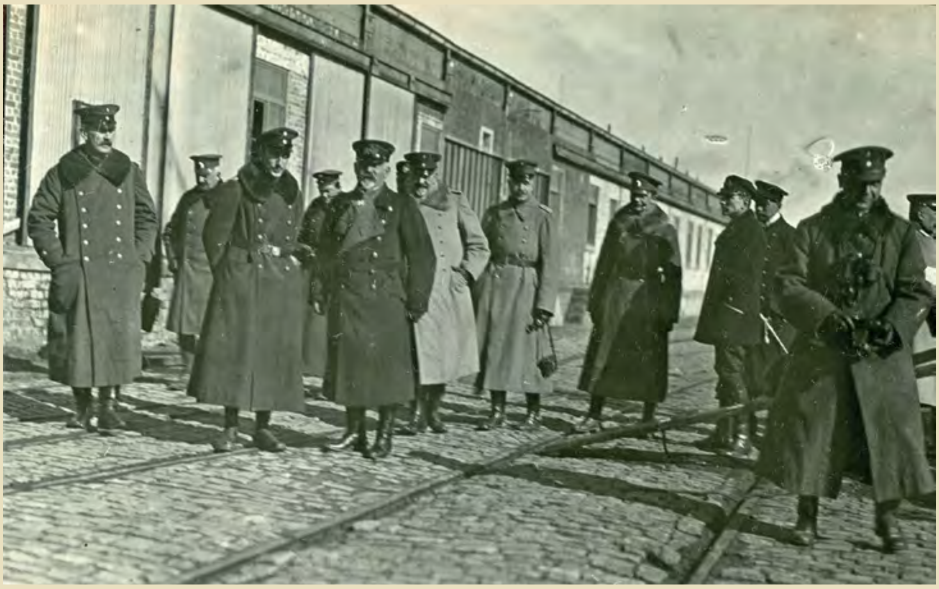
TERRIBLE SLAUGHTER

The German searchlights on the Mole eventually located *Vindictive*, projecting their intensive beams of light upon her structure making the vessel a glaring target. Immediately, close range fire erupted from the Mole's guns, some at ranges of less than 100 yards. Lieutenant Young continued: 'A searchlight shone out from the end of the Mole, swung to left and right, and settled on the ship. At once the guns on the Mole opened fire. From our dark bay we could see their flashes on our port bow, and there was a faint popping in the sea all-round the ship. More accustomed to the crash which a shell makes when it bursts ashore, I did not realize at the time that this was the noise of shells that had missed us and were bursting in the sea. At the next instant they began to hit.'

Air Mechanic Francis Donovan, who was aged twenty, recalled his baptism of fire, when the Mole battery began firing: 'My, what a din, it was shattering! Although Captain Carpenter put the *Vindictive* full speed ahead to run her alongside the Mole, I think we suffered more casualties running the gauntlet of the Mole battery than in the rest of the action.'

Sergeant Harry Wright also described the moment when the German batteries opened fire: 'The silence was broken by a terrific report, followed by a crash as the fragments of shell fell among us, killing and maiming the brave fellows as they stood to their arms, crowded together as thick as bees. The Mole was just in sight; we could see it off our port quarter. Our gunners replied to the fire but could not silence that terrible battery of five-inch guns, now firing into our ship at a range of less than a hundred yards from behind the concrete walls. A very powerful searchlight was now turned on us from the sand dunes at Zeebrugge, and the powerful batteries there began to fire. The slaughter was terrible.'





A group of German officers on the Mole at Zeebrugge. Admiral Ludwig von Schröder, commander of the Marinekorps Flandern, can be seen fifth from the left. (Paul Kendall Collection)

Private Philip Hodgson was with No.12 Platoon sheltering beneath a wooden lifeboat stowed on the upper deck. It was this wooden boat that protected them from the horrific inferno that was taking place around them: 'It seemed as if hell had been let loose, as the ship closed in against the wall and was struck by heavy shells around the forecastle, the control top and the foremost funnel, flame-throwers on the port-side and flaming pieces of metal flying everywhere, luckily for our group that old ship's boat bore the brunt of this, no wonder that it was so full of holes when I saw it next morning.'

As soon as the German shells began striking the old cruiser, *Vindictive*'s gunners were given permission to retaliate. Able Seaman Quinton Murdoch belonged to one of the 6-inch gun crews: 'Our point of attack before going alongside of the Mole was the light house at the end. Within 400 yards off our 1½ pounder Pom-Poms on the fore control top opened fire, this being our permissive to open fire; so we let rip. Immediately after a shell from the battery on the end of the Mole came through the boarding deck above us, struck our gun, and glanced through a door on to the quarter-deck, where it exploded.

'One of the gun's crew was killed and the others, including myself, were knocked over by the force of the concussion. Owing to the close range and thick fog screen, I cannot say where our shells exactly dropped but I can safely say they were not very far from our objective. We managed to get five rounds off before striking the Mole, where we had to cease fire as our gun was close up alongside the wall.'

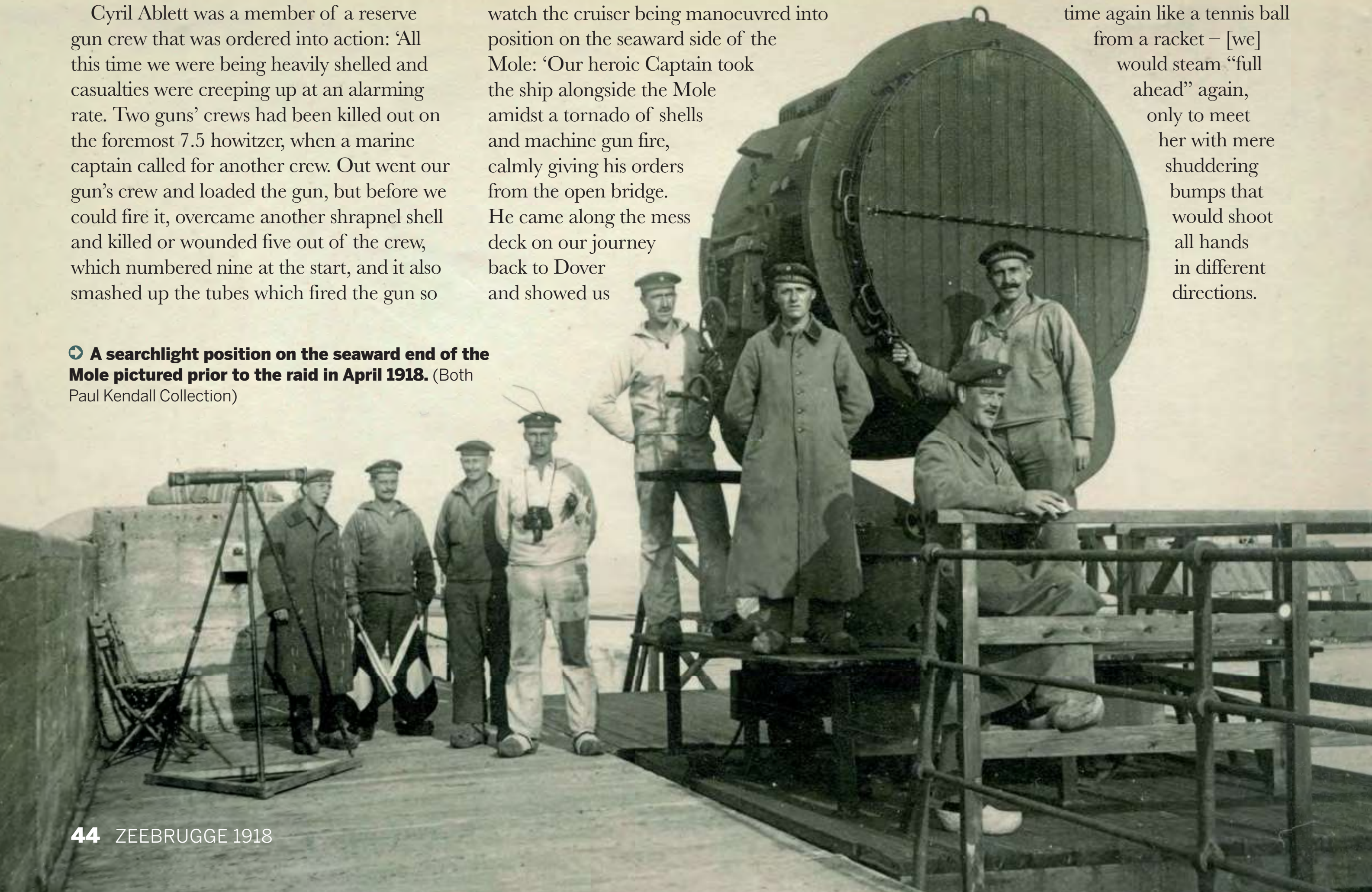
Cyril Ablett was a member of a reserve gun crew that was ordered into action: 'All this time we were being heavily shelled and casualties were creeping up at an alarming rate. Two guns' crews had been killed out on the foremost 7.5 howitzer, when a marine captain called for another crew. Out went our gun's crew and loaded the gun, but before we could fire it, overcame another shrapnel shell and killed or wounded five out of the crew, which numbered nine at the start, and it also smashed up the tubes which fired the gun so we were ordered to take the wounded below. The funnels were riddled, and our bridge completely wrecked, but we never took any notice of anything but our work.'

Lieutenant Arthur Lougher was in charge of operations below decks: 'The whole of the time we were alongside the Mole we were continually shelled ... the noise of the firing was something terrific and although I was sorely tempted to go up and see how things were going on, I had to stick to my duties below. The noise was deafening, and the ship rocked like a cradle.'

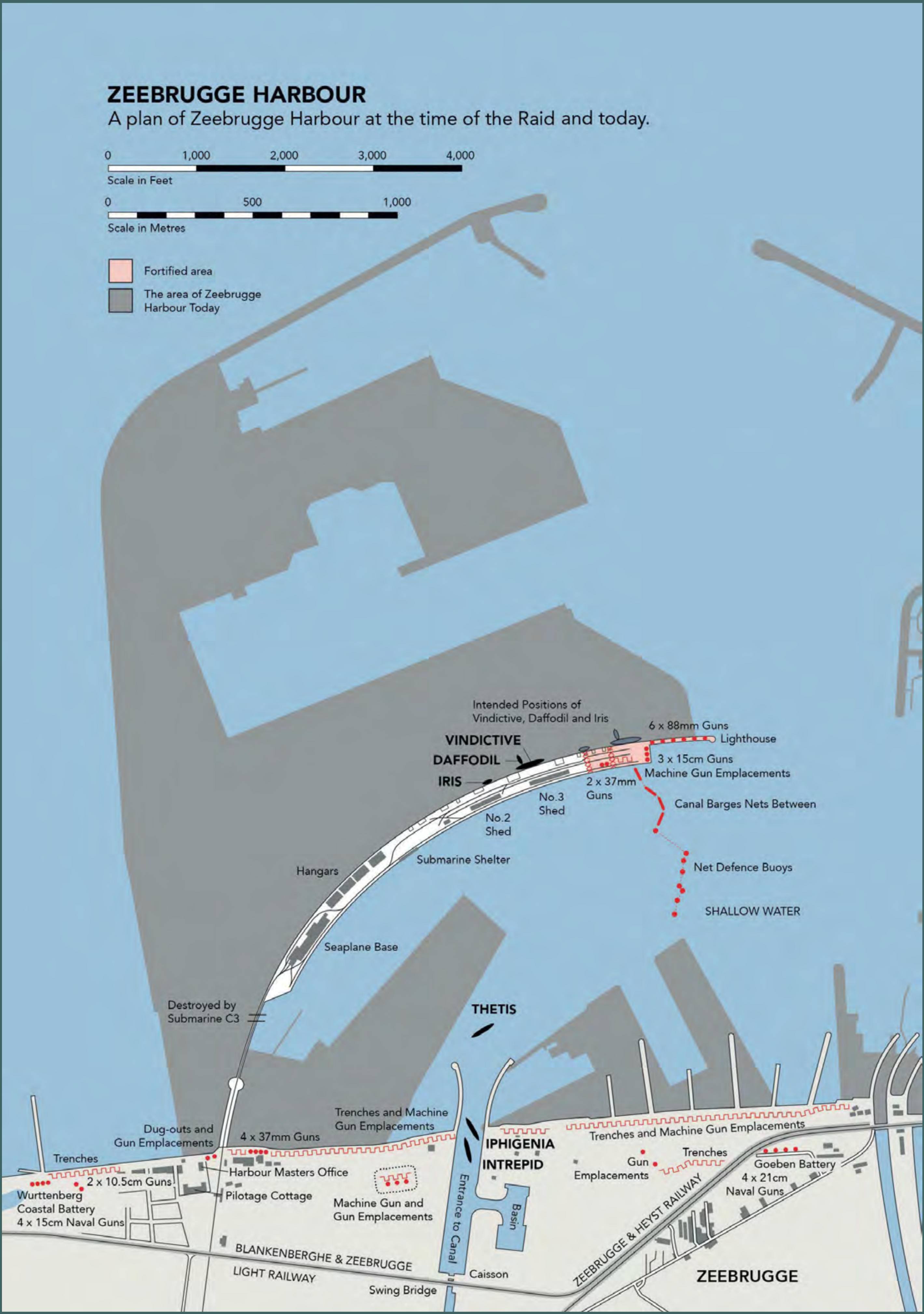
Private John Kember was a machine-gunner aboard *Vindictive* and was able to watch the cruiser being manoeuvred into position on the seaward side of the Mole: 'Our heroic Captain took the ship alongside the Mole amidst a tornado of shells and machine gun fire, calmly giving his orders from the open bridge. He came along the mess deck on our journey back to Dover and showed us his uniform cap, which had bullet holes in it round the peak, but after being so exposed he only received a wound in the arm. He handled the ship as though it was but a picket boat.'

DAFFODIL IN DANGER

Behind *Vindictive* was *Daffodil*, whose task was to ensure that the cruiser was held against the Mole. On *Daffodil*'s helm was Petty Officer James Cownie, who had to get the ferry's bows underneath *Vindictive*'s fore bridge. 'This sounds all right no doubt under decent conditions,' wrote Harry Adams, 'but not so easy with heavy seas running and deep swells. We bounced off her time and time again like a tennis ball from a racket – [we] would steam "full ahead" again, only to meet her with mere shuddering bumps that would shoot all hands in different directions.



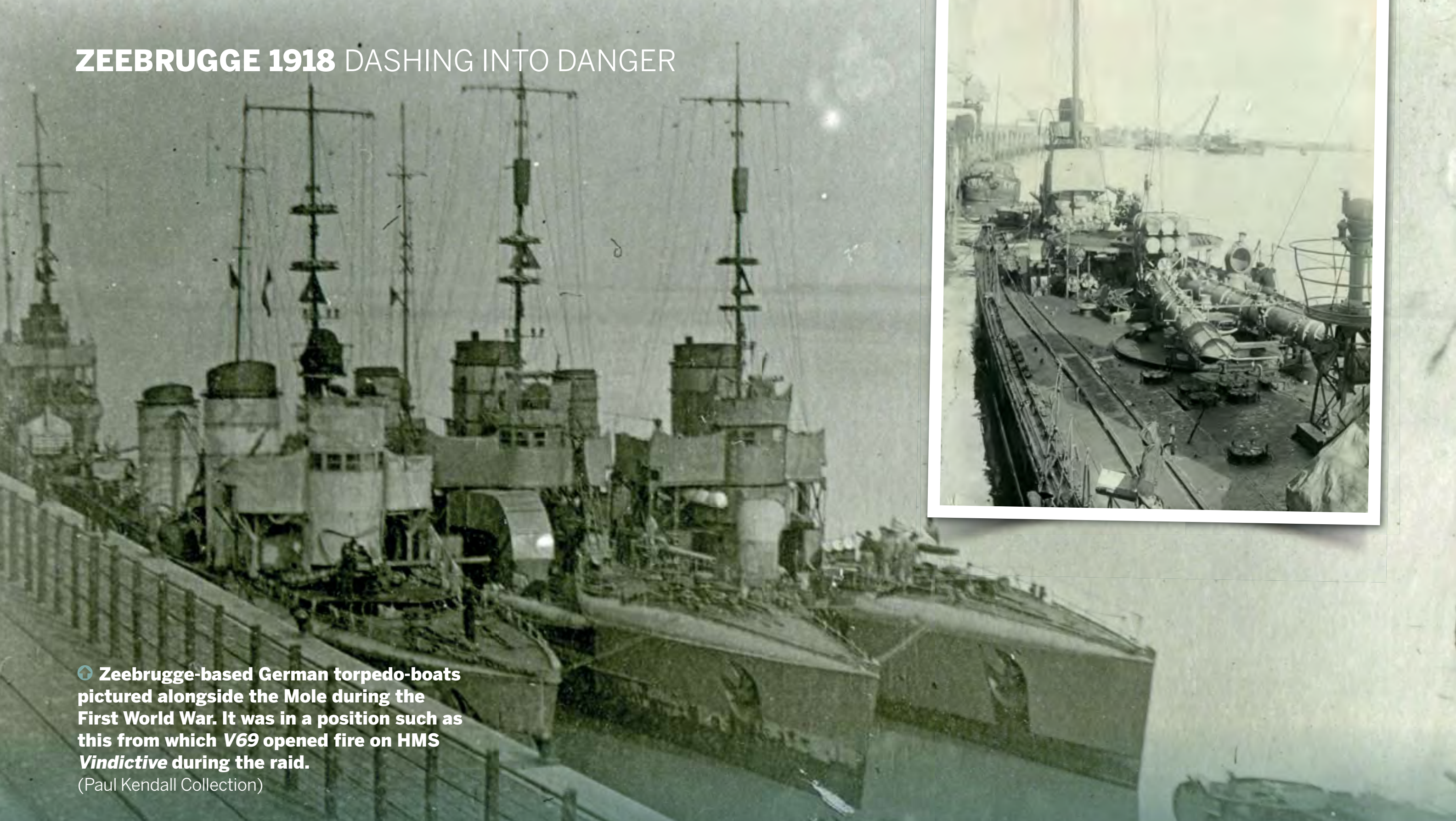
A searchlight position on the seaward end of the Mole pictured prior to the raid in April 1918. (Both Paul Kendall Collection)



ZEEBRUGGE HARBOUR

A plan of Zeebrugge Harbour at the time of the Raid and today.

0
1,000
2,000
3,000
4,000
Scale in Feet
0
500
1,000
Scale in Metres
Fortified area
The area of Zeebrugge Harbour Today
Intended Positions of Vindictive, Daffodil and Iris
6 x 88mm Guns
Lighthouse
VINDICTIVE
DAFFODIL
IRIS
3 x 15cm Guns
Machine Gun Emplacements
2 x 37mm Guns
No.3 Shed
No.2 Shed
Canal Barges Nets Between
Submarine Shelter
Hangars
Net Defence Buoys
SHALLOW WATER
Seaplane Base
Destroyed by Submarine C3
THETIS
Dug-outs and Gun Emplacements
Trenches and Machine Gun Emplacements
4 x 37mm Guns
Trenches
2 x 10.5cm Guns
Wurttenberg Coastal Battery
4 x 15cm Naval Guns
Harbour Masters Office
Pilotage Cottage
Machine Gun and Gun Emplacements
IPHIGENIA
INTREPID
Entrance to Canal
Basin
Trenches and Machine Gun Emplacements
Gun Emplacements
Trenches
Goeben Battery
4 x 21cm Naval Guns
ZEEBRUGGE & HEYST RAILWAY
BLANKENBERGHE & ZEEBRUGGE LIGHT RAILWAY
Swing Bridge
Caisson
ZEEBRUGGE



Zeebrugge-based German torpedo-boats pictured alongside the Mole during the First World War. It was in a position such as this from which *V69* opened fire on HMS *Vindictive* during the raid. (Paul Kendall Collection)

Great is the wonder she didn't smash herself to bits; her boilers must have been near explosion point – and the Huns still blasting away unceasingly at us.'

Able Seaman Thomas Bradley described the terrible scenes onboard *Daffodil*: 'We reached the Mole [and on], on getting alongside, a German destroyer on the other side of the Mole spotted us and the next moment machine guns were pumping lead at the *Daffodil* … A chap who was standing next to me amidst the turmoil remarked that he had two brothers killed in the war. "I am the last one in the family," he added "and I don't think I will ever see England again". The words had no sooner left his lips than a shell burst overhead; a fragment tore through his lifebelt and bandolier and penetrated his body just below his heart. The lad dropped at my feet.

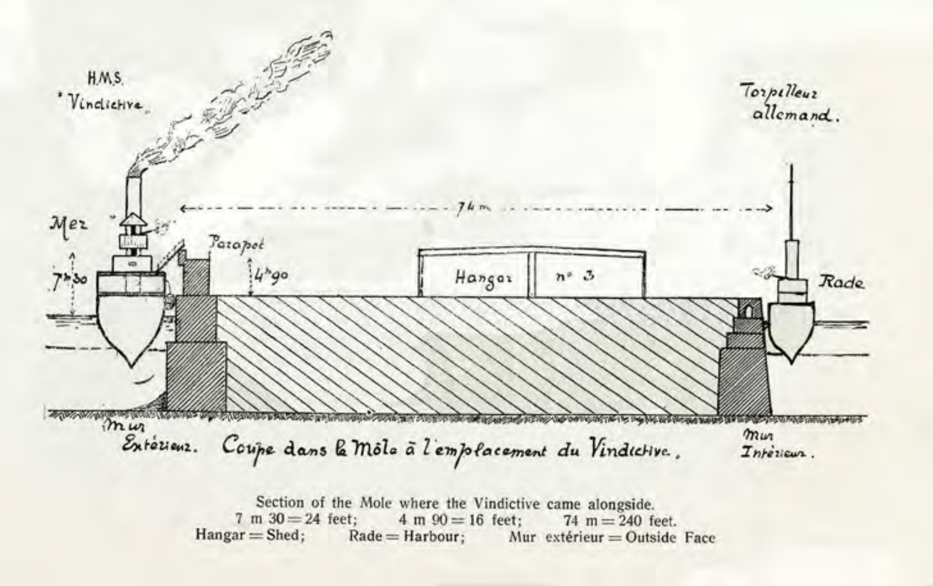
'Then I felt something strike me. My hand rushed to my side, and, honestly, I thought that I had received my death wound. It amazed me that I was still on my feet. I looked at my lifebelt and saw that a hole had been torn in it. My bandolier was also torn, and when I felt my jersey I saw another hole. I pushed my hand next to my skin, and my fingers rested on something hard. I pulled my fingers out, and with it a large piece of shrapnel, which by some wonderful luck had merely grazed the flesh after having been driven through my equipment and then through my clothing, where it had stopped a few inches beneath my heart. I shook hands with myself at my escape.'

It was apparent that if *Daffodil* moved off from *Vindictive*, the cruiser would not be able to stay against the Mole and the storming parties would be unable to leave the ship or get back on board after completing their tasks. This, though, presented a problem for the sailors of the Naval storming party on the ferry who were supposed to land. Sub Lieutenant Chevallier was one of them:

'We were ordered to push the bows of the *Vindictive* alongside and keep pushing all the time, as her parapet anchors would not reach. Consequently, there was no means of getting on board her except over the bows of the *Daffodil* and this was rendered very difficult by the heavy swell. I and four men, A.B. Patton, A.B. Bone, A.B. Salter, A.B. Butter, were able to climb on board the *Vindictive* and thence onto the Mole, but the remainder were unable to follow, as the *Daffodil* was being shelled all the time.'

Daffodil was a potential floating bomb with all the munitions for the Stoke mortars stored above and below decks. As *Daffodil* could not leave *Vindictive* neither the mortars nor their bombs could be taken ashore. Lieutenant Harold Campbell therefore became concerned about the risk of a shell explosion or small arms fire igniting the whole lot and destroying the vessel. He decided to throw the deadly cargo into the water. One of those men ordered to dispose of mortar bombs was Harry Adams: 'One side of the Fore Peak of the vessel was stocked full of this ammunition and when Commander Campbell found plans had gone wrong, rather than risk an explosion, gave the order to dump every bit of both guns and ammunition; so over went the lot. Four of us went down below and racked out these boxes of shells and passed them up for others to pass over the side and whilst down there, we had a German shell pay us a visit – luckily it didn't explode, but left us a filthy load of gas.

'Very soon we found nobody at the top of the hatch taking stuff away – apparently, they were busy putting out fires that had broken out


H.M.S. Vindictive
Torpilleur allemand.
Mer
74 m
Parapet
7m30
4m90
Hangar
n° 3
Rade
Mur Extérieur.
Coupe dans le Môle à l'emplacement du Vindictive.
Mur Intérieur.
Section of the Mole where the Vindictive came alongside.
7 m 30 = 24 feet; 4 m 90 = 16 feet; 74 m = 240 feet.
Hangar = Shed; Rade = Harbour; Mur extérieur = Outside Face

A plan showing the position of HMS *Vindictive* after she finally came alongside the Mole at Zeebrugge, on the opposite side of which is the German torpedo-boat *V69*. The latter promptly engaged the raiders, firing right across the width of the Mole. (Paul Kendall Collection) in the other parts of the ship and attending casualties. By this time, the Germans had got complete range of us – stationary targets, and clearly visible – just try to imagine it, at point blank range … A miracle how even so many got back.'

IRIS ARRIVES

Commanded by Commander Valentine Gibbs, *Iris* had followed closely behind *Vindictive* and *Daffodil* in the final approach towards the Mole. Onboard was Petty Officer William O'Hara: 'Suddenly out of the mist we saw the *Vindictive* alongside the Mole with the *Daffodil* pushing her alongside; we then proceeded about 200 yards ahead of her and with our Stokes guns bombarded the Mole.'

As it passed *Vindictive* and *Daffodil*, *Iris* also came under hostile fire and suffered heavy casualties, but she continued along the Mole until Commander Gibbs was able to steer her against the structure, 'bumping it heavily, and came to with starboard anchor at two shackles,' recalled Lieutenant Oscar Henderson. 'There being a very heavy swell we had considerable difficulty in getting parapet anchors to catch. Finally, No.1 anchor jammed on a telephone standard and was secured. We then endeavoured to catch with the fore derrick anchor (No.2). To do this, Lieutenant Commander G.N. Bradford, RN climbed up derrick and very gallantly placed the anchor.'

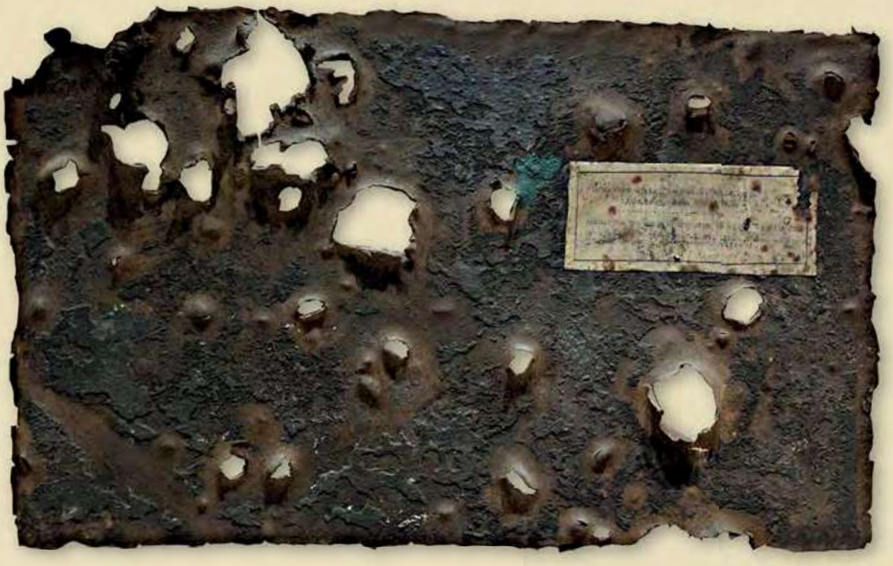
Petty Officer William O'Hara witnessed George Bradford's courageous act as he tried to secure *Iris* to the Mole: 'I heard a cheer and looking up was our section commander, Lt Comdr. Bradford climbing up our derrick which was trained over the Mole; he was successful in reaching the Mole and immediately made fast our grapnel; unfortunately as he finished he stood up, and therefore became a target for enemy snipers, he was shot and fell between the ship and the Mole; we managed to get a line to him which he grasped but as he was badly wounded he did not have the strength to hold on and be pulled up; a ladder was procured and placed over the side but unfortunately just as a volunteer was descending to his aid a rather heavy swell dashed *Iris* against the Mole and he was crushed between.'

The grapnel was unable to hold *Iris* alongside and after Bradford fell into the sea, Lieutenant Claude Ernest Hawkings made a further attempt to secure the Mersey ferry to the Mole, all of which was observed by Lieutenant Oscar Henderson: 'While doing this he was shot and fell between ship's side and Mole. This anchor bent and slipped off immediately the strain came on it. At the same time Lieutenant C.E.V. Hawkings RN got on one of the ladders placed and swarmed up it onto the Mole. When last seen he was defending himself with his revolver, and I fear he was killed. At this moment [the] No.1 anchor tore away from telephone standard, and [the] ship surged away from Mole.'

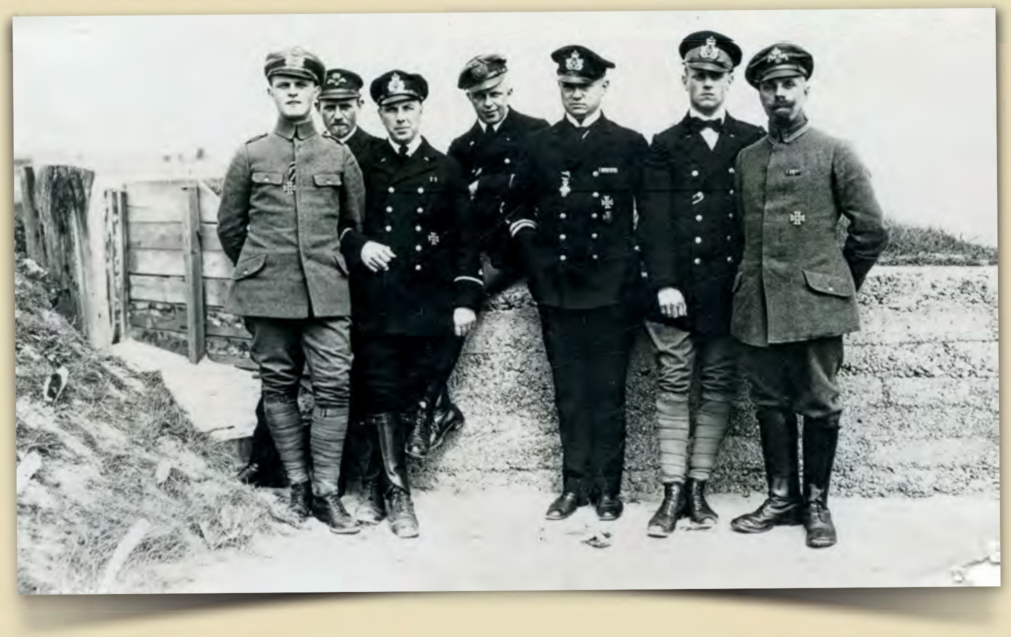
Lieutenant Edward Hilton Young was the gunnery officer supervising the forward 6-inch gun crew aboard *Vindictive*, and he recalled seeing the events that were unfolding aboard *Iris*: 'The *Iris* had appeared out of the dark and come alongside of us at our starboard waist. Owing to the heavy swell she had found it impossible to carry out her intention of landing her men on the Mole ahead of us. The scaling ladders could not be made fast, and Bradford and Hawkins [*sic*], the leaders of her landing parties of seamen, who had climbed on to the Mole in order to try and secure the ladders, had both been killed in the attempt. Bradford climbed up a davit and jumped ashore; Hawkins, his second-in-command, climbed up by a line. The Mole at that point was swept by machine gun and rifle fire, and was incessantly illuminated by star shells and rockets. They must have known well that their undertaking was all but hopeless; there could not have been a more gallant act.'

Further efforts were made to secure *Iris* to the Mole and to place scaling ladders against it so that the assaulting parties could land, but all to no avail – all the time under intense fire from machine-guns and then rifles. It became clear that the ferry could not be held against the Mole and Gibbs saw that the only chance of landing the men was by placing his boat alongside *Vindictive* to enable the Marines to climb across the cruiser's deck. Gibb, therefore, slipped *Iris*'s starboard cable, spun the ferry round and took her alongside *Vindictive*'s starboard quarter.

Despite the firepower of the German batteries, *Vindictive* was being held against the Mole and the landing parties from the cruiser and *Iris* were at last in a position to launch their assault. ◉



A piece of heavily perforated funnel removed from HMS *Vindictive* after the raid – this being the kind of damage recalled by Cyril Ablett. (Historic Military Press)



A few of the German defenders. Kaptainleutnant der Reserve Schutte (third right), commander of the battery on the Mole at Zeebrugge, is pictured with a number of officers who served alongside him during the night of 22-23 April 1918. Second in command of the battery was Oberleutnant Adolf Rodewald (second right). This officer, along with Leutnant Zimmermann (extreme left) led a handful of men in a counter-attack against elements of the British landing party who were attempting to capture and knock out the Mole battery guns. (Paul Kendall Collection)

Shaking Heaven and Earth

It was next the turn of the submarines to rush as fast as possible round the outside of the Mole and crash into the viaduct.

The C-class submarine HMS *C3* pictured underway on the surface prior to the attack in April 1918. *C3* was laid down at the Vickers yard in Barrow on 25 November 1905 and was commissioned on 23 February 1906. (Paul Kendall Collection)

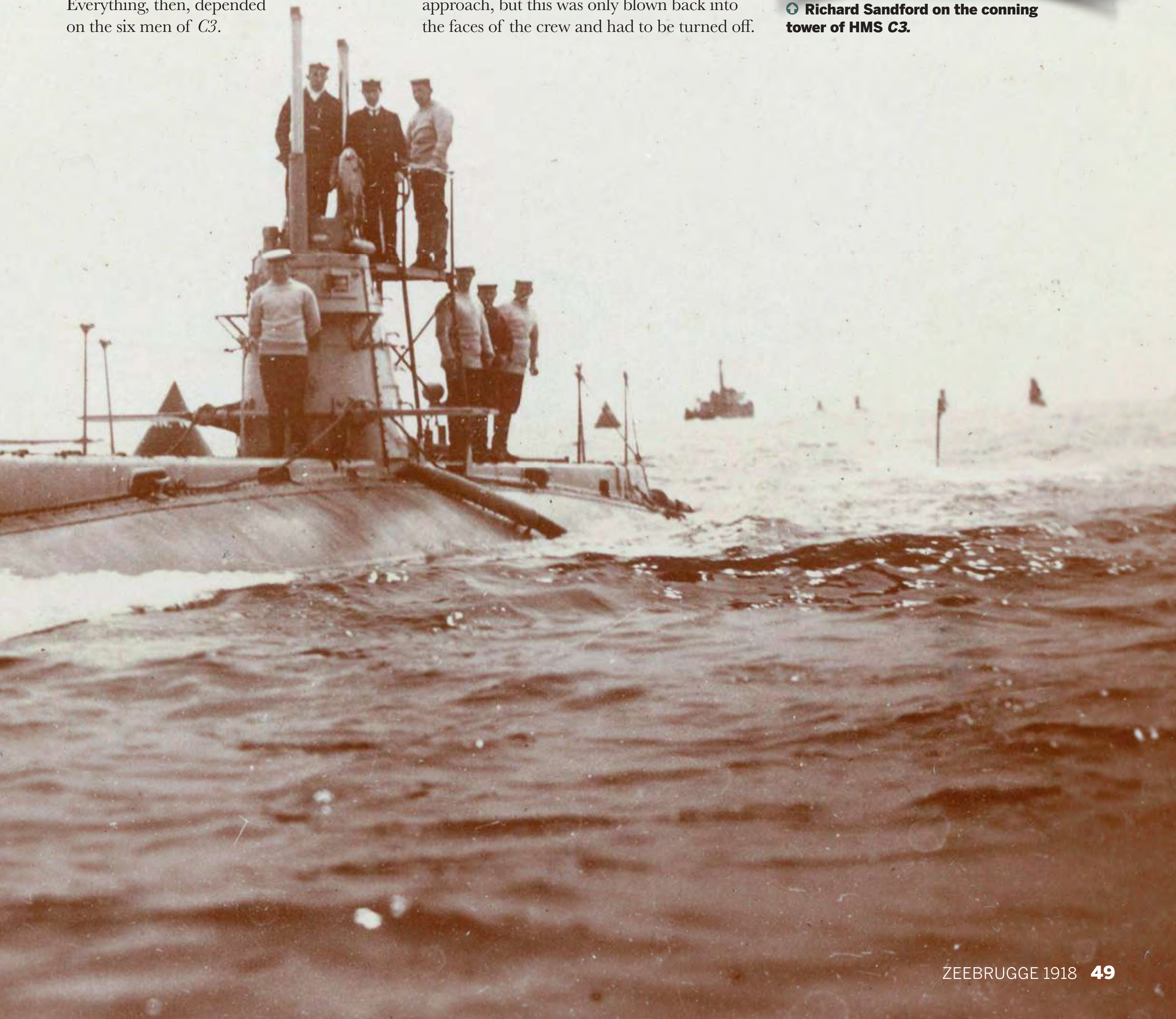
The role of the submarines was to destroy the viaduct which joined the Mole to the shore and prevent reinforcements crossing from the land. For this, the C-class submarine *C3* had five tons of explosive fitted with a time-fuse packed into its bows. It was intended that the submarine would crash into the viaduct, the time-fuse would be set, and the crew would escape by skiff before the explosive detonated and blew the viaduct to pieces.

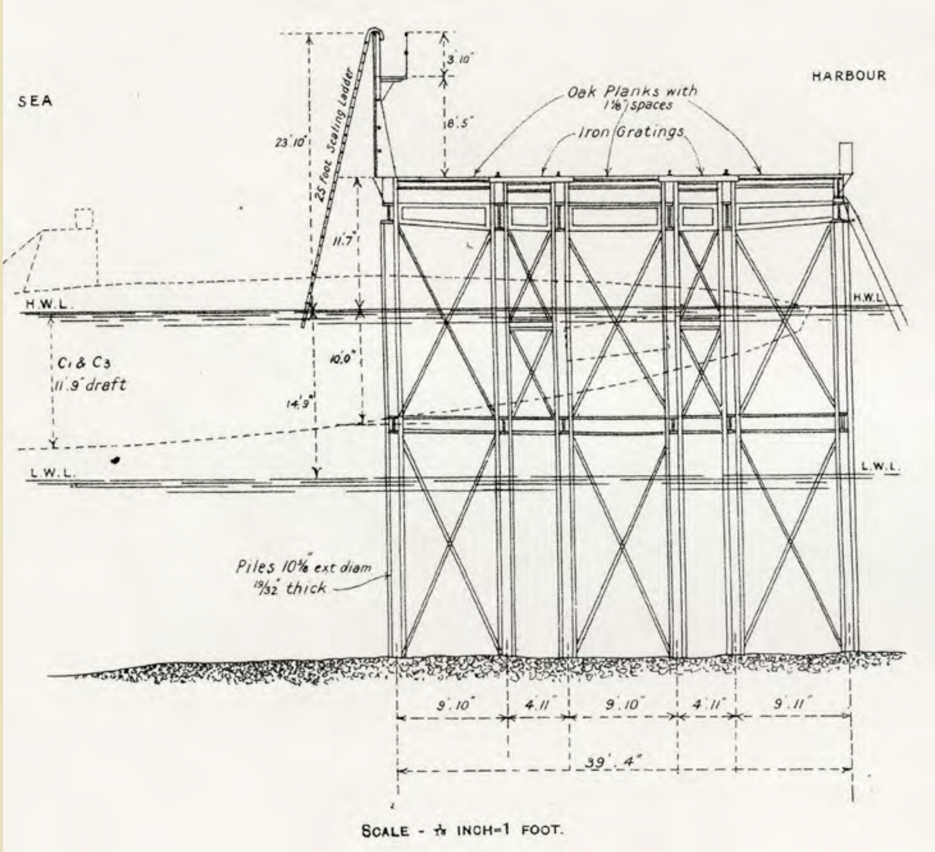
For this operation, only a skeleton crew of two officers and four men were required. Her commander on the Zeebrugge Raid was Lieutenant Richard Sandford, whilst the other crew members were Lieutenant John Howell-Price, Stoker Henry Bindall, Petty Officer Walter Harner, Leading Seaman William Cleaver and Engine Room Artificer Allan Roxburgh. Her sister ship, HMS *C1* under Lieutenant A.C. Newbold, was similarly crewed and prepared. Unfortunately, there was a problem detaching *C1*'s hawser during the tow across the North Sea and she was unable to continue with her mission. Everything, then, depended on the six men of *C3*.

Lieutenant Sandford recalled both the journey across the English Channel and then the final approach towards the Mole and viaduct at Zeebrugge: '*C3* proceeded out of harbour at 1.30 pm and, being taken in tow by HMS *Trident*, proceeded to rendezvous A. On arrival of Swin force, proceeded in company for Position G. Fifty-six minutes after passing G slipped tow as arranged, and observing that *C1* and picket boat were not in company … After 18 minutes smoke was encountered, but this cleared 3 minutes later and after 21 minutes on this course, course was altered to S. 48. E. according to instructions, and *C3* proceeded direct for viaduct distant about 1½ miles.'

Lieutenant Howell-Price, the second-in-command of *C3*, noted that it was at midnight when the destroyer altered course for the run-in to Zeebrugge. It was then that a star shell was fired and in its bright flash the submarine was spotted by the enemy. First one searchlight, and then two others, focused their beams on *C3*, but at the same time, Price was able to see the viaduct ahead and slightly to port. *C3* began to make smoke to conceal her approach, but this was only blown back into the faces of the crew and had to be turned off.

Richard Sandford on the conning tower of HMS *C3*.





A diagram showing a cross section of the viaduct at Zeebrugge which connected the Mole to the shore and was the target of HMS C3's attack. (Paul Kendall Collection)

RAMMING HOME

With the Mole only about half a mile away, a flare, burning on the far side, silhouetted both it and viaduct to which *C3* was aiming. To Sandford, this 'appeared about two points on the port bow'. The two searchlights that had picked up *C3* were switched off, but by this time the viaduct was clearly visible looming ahead. When 100 yards from the viaduct, course was altered to ensure the submarine hit it at exactly the correct angle. The submarine smashed into the viaduct at a speed of nine and a half knots. The boat struck exactly between two rows of piles, its bows riding up to the horizontal girders of the viaduct. The hull was lodged about two feet clear of the water.

Howell-Price also described the moment *C3* struck the viaduct: 'Proceeded on course till 12.04 am, then altered course to N. 85. E., ramming the viaduct at right angles at a speed of 9 knots, the submarine going through until brought up by the conning tower, and remaining firmly wedged in. I noticed numbers of the enemy on the viaduct and what apparently were gun-platforms built on to the piles, also a searchlight which we nearly rammed, and it was from these platforms most of the rifle firing came from. Up to the present, notwithstanding, the searchlights which had now been bearing on the submarine for 6 minutes, no shot was fired at the boat.'

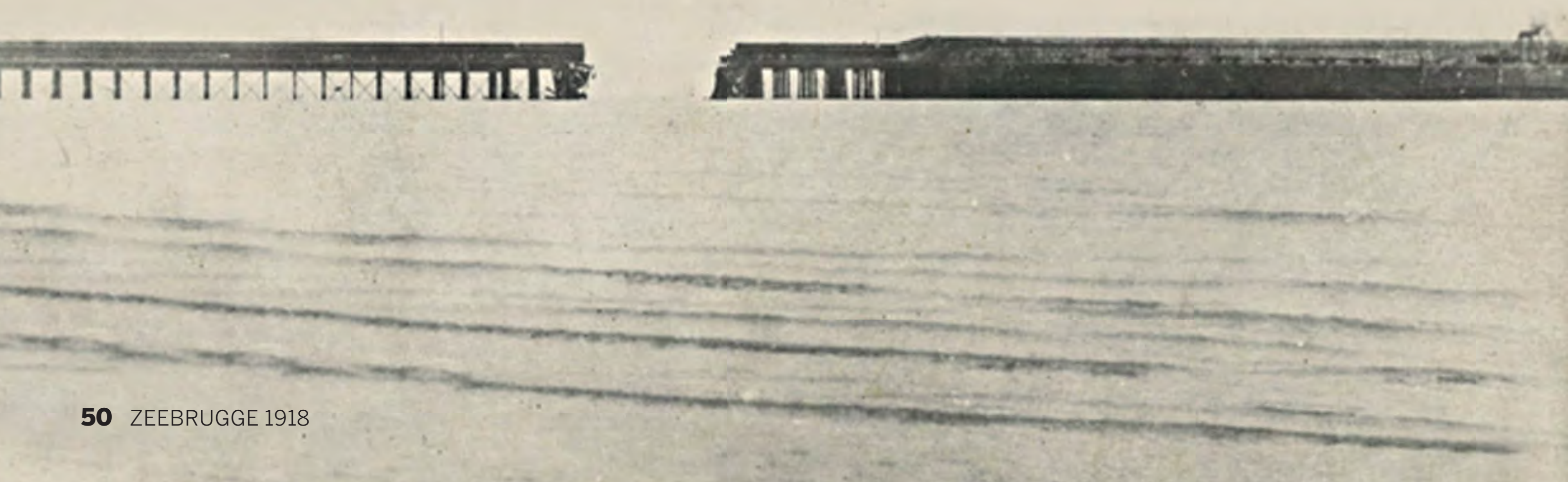
Stoker Henry Bindall had to hang on as the submarine struck the viaduct: 'She was going at full tilt when we hit the viaduct. It was a very good jolt, but you can stand a lot when you hang on tight. We ran right into the middle of the viaduct and stuck there as intended. I do not think anybody said a word except, "Well, we're here all right".'

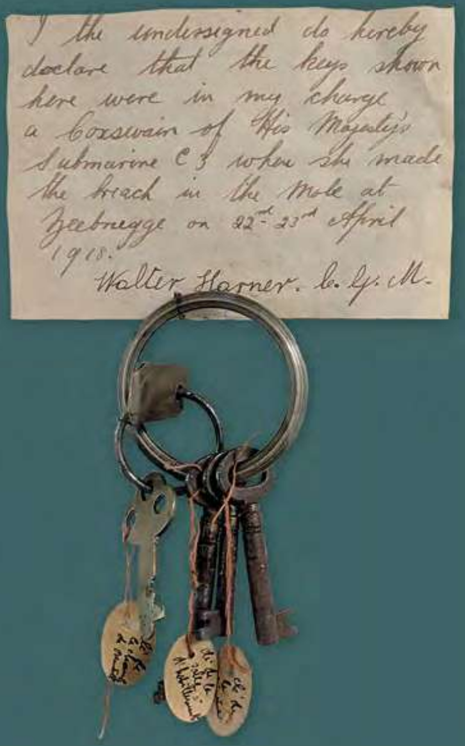
C3 had lodged its bows firmly in the viaduct, but that was only the first part of the operation. It was now a race against time to set the fuses on the demolition charges – before any German troops could run in from the shore and intervene – and then quickly get clear of the submarine. As Sandford dealt with the fuses, the rest of the crew set about abandoning the boat. The men assembled on deck and then lowered the skiff over the side.

William Cleaver recalled those tense moments after the impact waiting for Lieutenant Stanford to appear: 'We all stood and waited with bated breath. The shouting on the Mole above increased. There was the clatter of rifles. At last we saw the figure of our commander. He was hurrying along the deck towards us bending low. "Come on, Sir!" we yelled in chorus. There was a fusillade of rifle bullets from the Mole that whizzed menacingly past our heads. "Everything OK," said Lt. Sandford as breathlessly he jumped aboard the skiff. He told us afterwards that his delay was due to difficulty in lighting the fuses. He had also seen that the lights were out.'

A picture taken looking up the Mole at Zeebrugge during the First World War. In the foreground is the viaduct section which was attacked by HMS *C3*. The Mole proper starts just beyond. (Paul Kendall Collection)

The breach in the viaduct section of the harbour mole after the raid in April 1918. The shore is to the left of this view. (Historic Military Press)

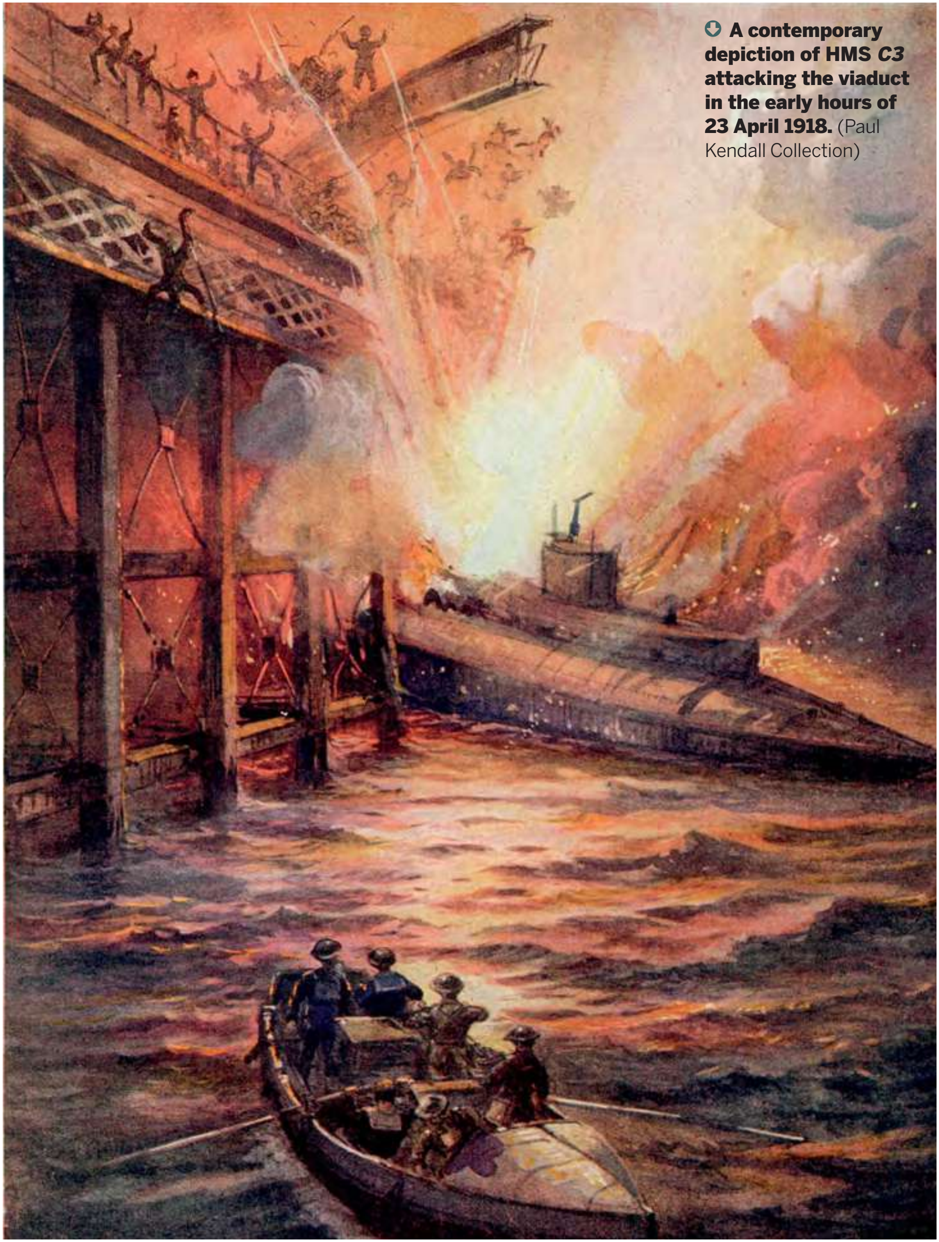




I the undersigned do hereby declare that the keys shown here were in my charge a Coxswain of His Majesty's Submarine C3 when she made the breach in the Mole at Zeebrugge on 22nd-23rd April 1918.

Walter Harner. C.G.M.

A remarkable relic from HMS *C3*'s part in the Zeebrugge Raid – one of a handful from the submarine and its crew that can be seen on display in the Police Station located on Marktplein in Zeebrugge. The handwritten caption states: 'I the undersigned do hereby declare that the keys shown here were in my charge a Coxswain of His Majesty's Submarine *C3* when she made the breach in the Mole at Zeebrugge on 22nd-23rd April 1918.' The note is signed by Walter Harner CGM. (Historic Military Press)



A contemporary depiction of HMS *C3* attacking the viaduct in the early hours of 23 April 1918. (Paul Kendall Collection)

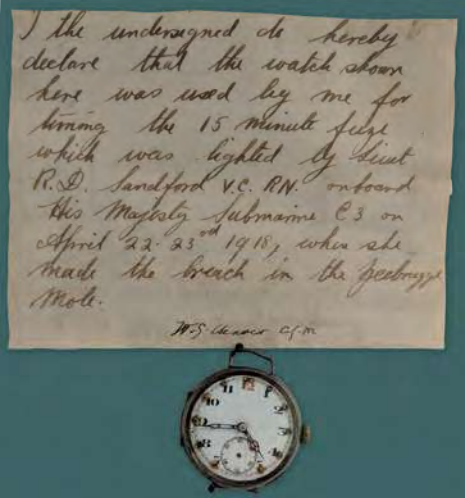
'THE MOST AWFUL SIGHT'

From the moment of setting the fuse, the men had just three minutes to get clear of the submarine. But almost as soon as the crew pushed off from *C3* the skiff was picked up by two searchlights, immediately followed by rattling fire from machine-guns and quick-firing anti-aircraft guns, and rifles from enemy troops firing down from the viaduct. The skiff was riddled with bullets. Sandford was wounded, and two other men were also hit.

The crew of the skiff were now in serious trouble as it was found that the little boat's propeller had been damaged as it was being dropped into the water, and the engine could not be used. Stoker Henry Bindall subsequently told a reporter that after *C3*'s crew had 'tumbled into the skiff and pushed off', they experienced what he described as 'rather a bit of bad luck': 'The propeller fouled the exhaust pipe and left us with only a couple of oars and two minutes to get away.'

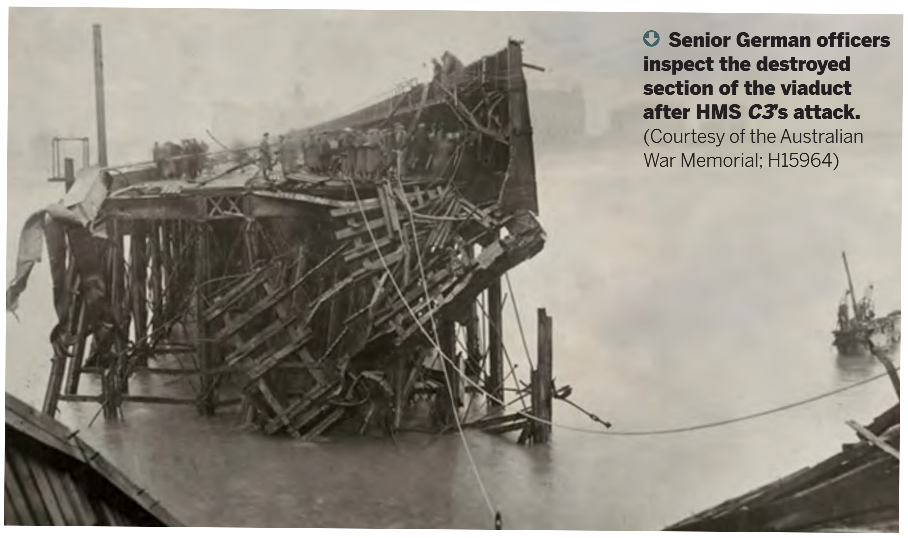
All that the men could do was take to the oars and try to row away, but their course was to the west and against the incoming tide.

Another of the Police Station *C3* relics. Once again, the handwritten caption states: 'I the undersigned do hereby declare that the watch shown here was used by me for timing the 15-minute fuse which was lighted by Lieut. R.D. Sandford VC RN onboard His Majesty Submarine *C3* on April 22.23rd 1918, when she made the breech in the Zeebrugge Mole'. It is signed by William Gladstone Cleaver CGM. (Historic Military Press)

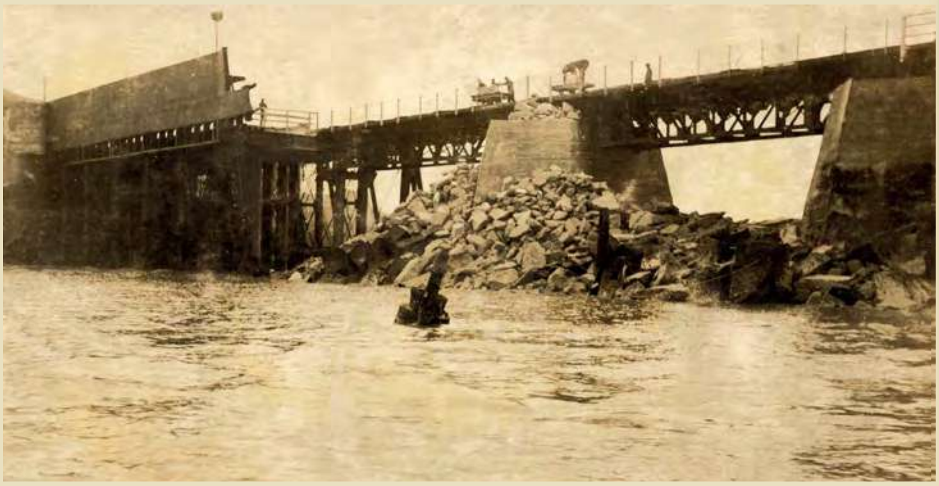


I the undersigned do hereby declare that the watch shown here was used by me for timing the 15 minute fuze which was lighted by Lieut R.D. Sandford V.C. RN. onboard His Majesty Submarine C3 on April 22-23rd 1918, when she made the breach in the Zeebrugge Mole.

W.G. Cleaver C.G.M.



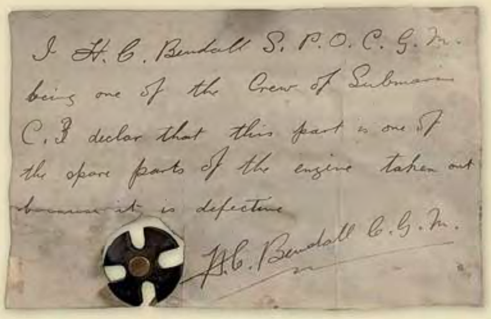
Senior German officers inspect the destroyed section of the viaduct after HMS *C3*'s attack. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; H15964)



The damage to the viaduct following the St George's Day raid. Part of the wreck of Lieutenant Sandford's HMS *C3*, more specifically the conning tower and periscope, are visible in the foreground. (Historic Military Press)

The skiff was also taking on water through the bullet holes in its sides. Fortunately, someone had the foresight to install a pump, and the men, wounded or not, had to work the pump to keep the badly-damaged skiff afloat.

With just moments to go before the explosives in the submarine detonated, the men had to row for their lives, as Cleaver later described: '"The oars!"' shouted someone. Bindall and Harner grabbed them from the bottom of the skiff and began to pull madly away from the Mole. Less than two minutes to go now probably … What frantic strokes Bindall and Harner were making … Bindall rolled over with a groan. He was wounded in the thigh. I took his place with the oars. By this time the boat had been hit several times and was leaking badly. Roxburgh and Lieut. Price were having a busy time with the hand pumps. Had it not been for them the boat would undoubtedly have sunk.'

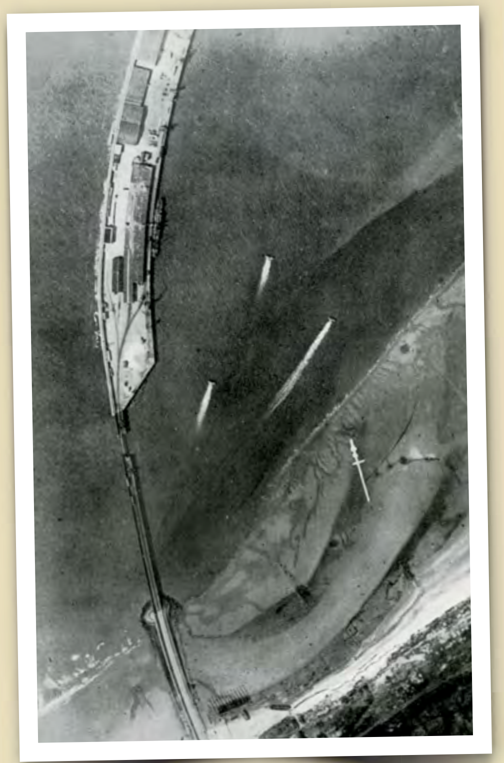


I H.C. Bindall S.P.O. C.G.M.
being one of the Crew of Submarine
C.3 declar that this part is one of
the spare parts of the engine taken out
because it is defective
H.C. Bindall C.G.M.

This relic from HMS *C3* is another of those on display in the Police Station in Zeebrugge. The handwritten caption states: 'I H.C. Bindall SPO, CGM, being one of the crew of submarine *C.3* declar [*sic*] that this part is one of the spare parts of the engine taken out because it is defective'. This note was signed by Henry Cullis Bindall CGM. (Historic Military Press)

When they were just 200 yards from the submarine, at approximately 00.15 hours, *C3* exploded. The devastating blast tore a breach of between sixty and eighty feet wide in the viaduct, severing the link between the Mole and the shore.

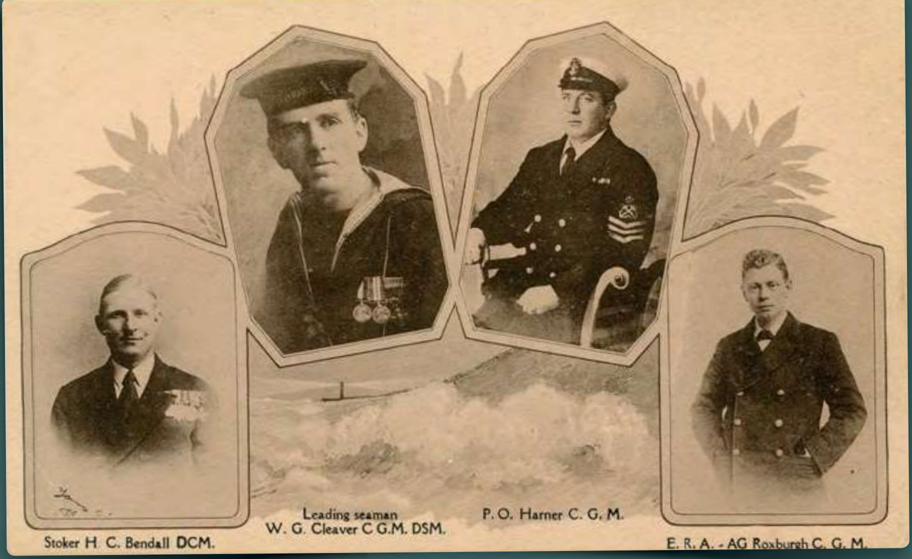
A number of German marines who were firing from the viaduct disappeared in the detonation. It was, mused Cleaver, 'as though Heaven came to meet Earth in one momentary upheaval. *C3* and the viaduct were no more. Above the din of the raging battle the fearful fulmination rose. Great chunks of masonry fell in the water all around us. The boat rocked and swayed as though possessed. Flames shot up to a tremendous height. In their glare was visible a great break in the Mole. Out of the sea rose great twisted masses of ironwork bent into grotesque shapes.'



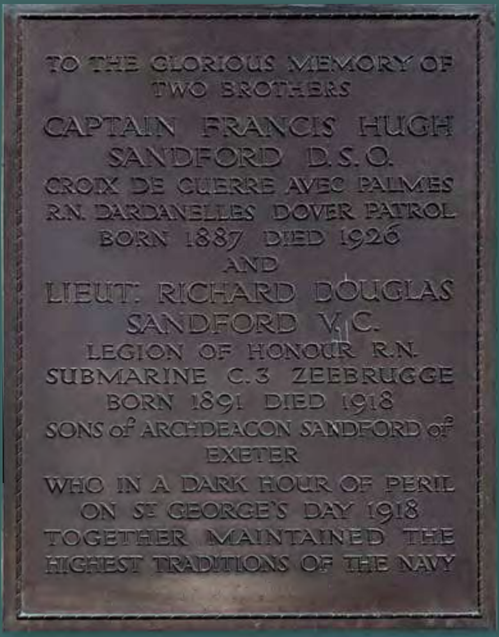
An aerial reconnaissance photograph of the bottom section of the Mole and the railway viaduct which was taken after the raid of April 1918. The temporary planking laid by the Germans over the breach caused by HMS *C3* can be seen. Note the three German seaplanes racing to take-off to intercept the photographer's aeroplane. (Paul Kendall Collection)

An unidentified piece of material that was taken from HMS *C3* by one of the crew. (Historic Military Press)

A view of the harbour at Zeebrugge taken by a German serviceman on the viaduct connecting the Mole proper to the shore. The buildings in the foreground formed part of the seaplane base at the time of the attack in April 1918, with the bomb store to the left alongside the Mole's parapet. The brick facing that marks the start of the Mole proper seen here survives to this day. (Paul Kendall Collection)

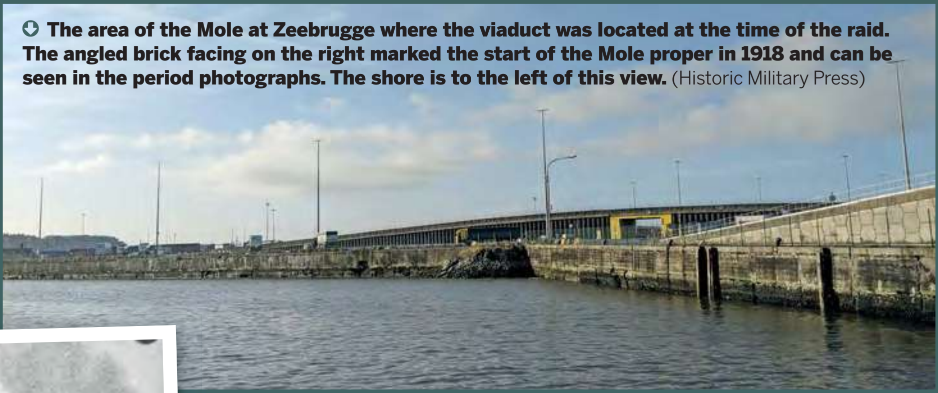

Stoker H. C. Bendall DCM.
Leading seaman
W. G. Cleaver C G.M. DSM.
P. O. Harner C. G. M.
E. R. A. - AG Roxburgh C. G. M.

A postcard depicting four of the crew of HM Submarine *C3* after the Zeebrugge Raid. They are, left to right, Stoker H.C. Bendall DCM; Leading Seaman W.G. Cleaver CGM, DSM: Petty Officer Harner CGM; and Engine Room Artificer A.G. Roxborough CGM. (Paul Kendall Collection)

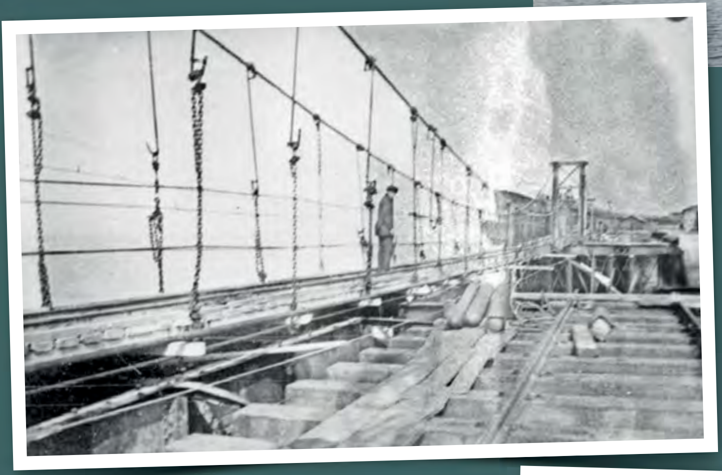


TO THE GLORIOUS MEMORY OF
TWO BROTHERS
CAPTAIN FRANCIS HUGH
SANDFORD D.S.O.
CROIX DE GUERRE AVEC PALMES
R.N. DARDANELLES DOVER PATROL
BORN 1887 DIED 1926
AND
LIEUT: RICHARD DOUGLAS
SANDFORD V.C.
LEGION OF HONOUR R.N.
SUBMARINE C.3 ZEEBRUGGE
BORN 1891 DIED 1918
SONS of ARCHDEACON SANDFORD of
EXETER
WHO IN A DARK HOUR OF PERIL
ON ST GEORGE'S DAY 1918
TOGETHER MAINTAINED THE
HIGHEST TRADITIONS OF THE NAVY

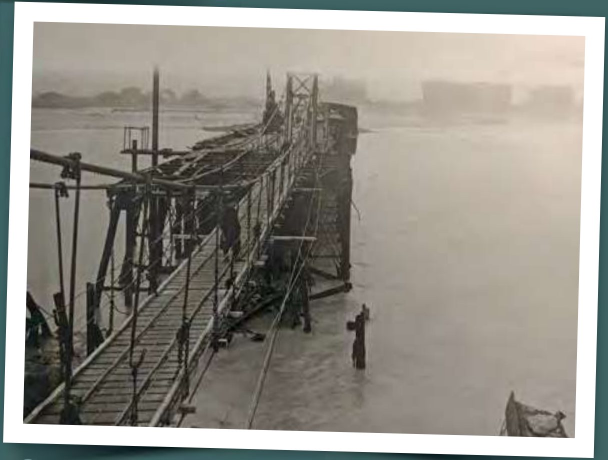
A plaque commemorating Lieutenant Richard Sandford VC and his brother that can be seen in Exeter Cathedral. Richard Sandford died of typhoid fever at Eston Hospital in North Yorkshire just twelve days after the signing of the Armistice. This was also the day after his last command, HMS *G11*, had been wrecked on rocks off the Northumberland coast. His Victoria Cross is displayed at the Britannia Royal Naval College in Dartmouth. (Courtesy Sara Mitchell)



The area of the Mole at Zeebrugge where the viaduct was located at the time of the raid. The angled brick facing on the right marked the start of the Mole proper in 1918 and can be seen in the period photographs. The shore is to the left of this view. (Historic Military Press)



A view of the breach blown in the Mole by HMS *C3*, and the temporary walkway that was placed across the gap in the aftermath of the attack. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; C04812)



Another view of the improvised gangway over the breech pictured after the end of the war. (Historic Military Press)

Stoker Henry Bendall, described how there was 'a tremendous flash, bang, crash, and lots of concrete from the Mole fell all round us into the water. It was luck that we were not struck.' Harry Adams, on the deck of *Daffodil*, witnessed the moment when *C3* exploded. 'There was, a terrible deafening explosion, a thud that shook Heaven and Earth – The ships shivered and trembled – the nearest approach to an earthquake one could imagine. We had been warned to expect it, but amongst all this it had passed from one's mind – the concussion, threw you to the deck.'

Air Mechanic Gough was on the Mole when the submarine blew up: 'It was just at this moment that the English submarine packed with high explosives (28 tons of amatol, one of the vilest explosives known to modern science) got in under the viaduct at the shore end of the Mole and was blown up. It was the greatest and at the same time the most awful sight I have ever witnessed. A huge column of fire – blood-red, through the fog, suddenly shot up, followed almost immediately by the crash of the explosion, and a concussion that seemed to lift the bottom out of everything and that must have rocked Zeebrugge and its surroundings to the foundations.'

Huge chunks of concrete were thrown in all directions for hundreds of yards. The searchlights that had been focusing on the skiff went out and almost all of the gunfire that had been directed at it ceased. Around ten minutes later, the special picket boat earmarked to pick up the crew of *C3* located the skiff and took the men on board. The boat moved northwards away from the harbour and after about fifteen minutes fell in with HMS *Phoebe*, the wounded men being transferred to the destroyer.

Though left to destroy the viaduct on their own without the help of *C1*, the six men of *C3* had accomplished their part of the operation with resounding success.

Lieutenant Sandford, who would be one of those awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions that night, said this about the mission: 'I set the fuse myself and I think the thing was done all right. We were lucky in being picked up by the picket boats afterwards. The firing from the shore was a bit severe at 200 yards, and only the fact that the sea was a bit rough and we were up and down a good deal saved us. The crew did their duty, every man. They were all volunteers and picked men.'

'Over You Go, Boys'

With HMS *Vindictive* pushed against the Mole, the landing parties swarmed ashore – but the old cruiser had been berthed in the wrong position.

During the approach to the Mole, most of the wooden brows that were to be used by the assault parties to get onto the Mole had been damaged; destroyed either by the enemy bullets and shells or crushed against the Mole in the swell, leaving only two brows intact. *Daffodil* tried to keep the old cruiser hard against the Mole, but in the heavy swell *Vindictive* lurched wildly, with the outer ends of the brows resting on the Mole parapet one minute, and then waving six feet above it the next.

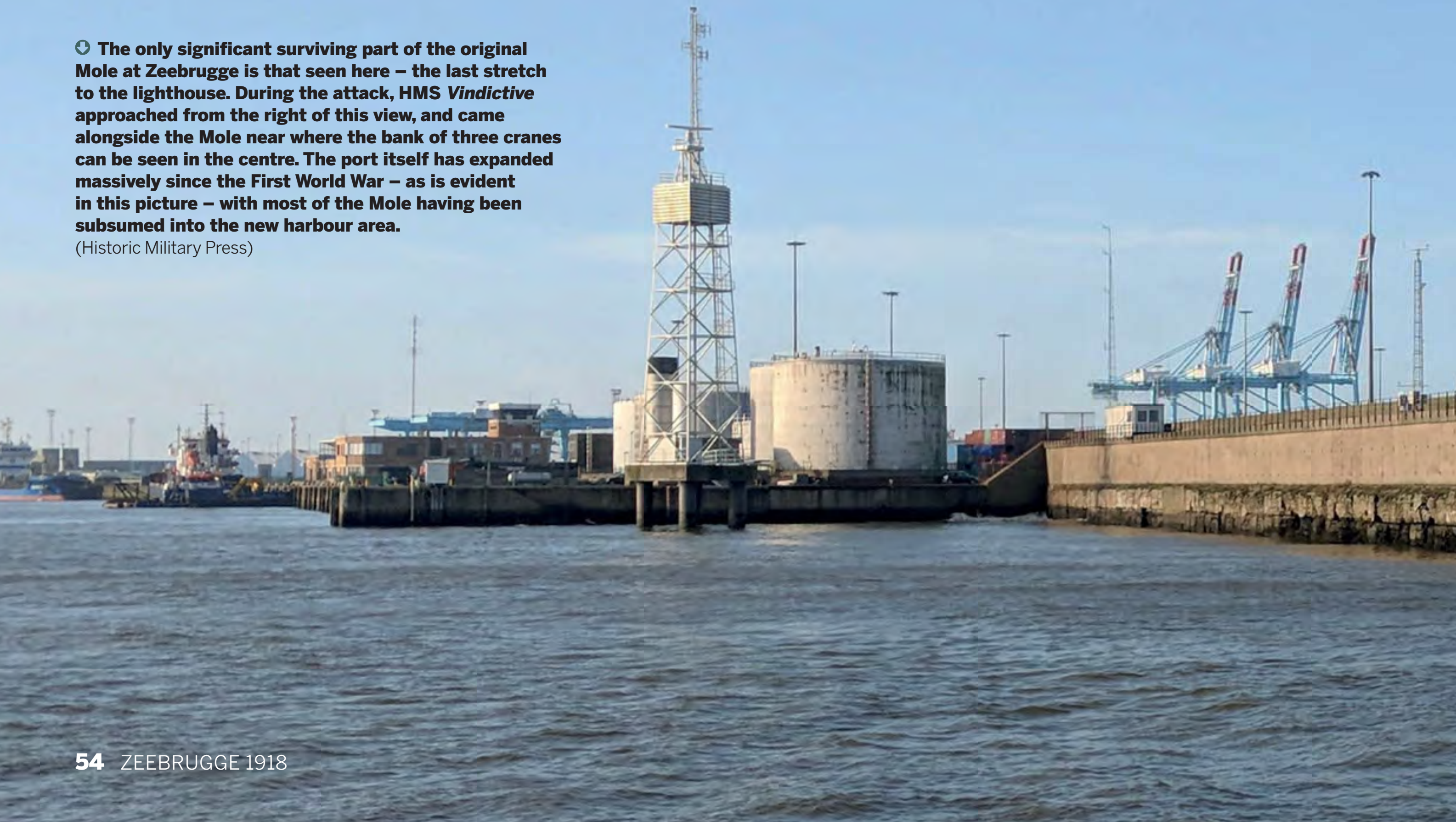
There was nothing that Captain Carpenter could do to keep the warship steady: 'The difficulty of getting along a narrow and extremely unsteady brow whilst fully accoutred, the fact that the men on the brow were under heavy machine gun fire from close range, and the presence of a thirty-foot drop between the Mole and the ship ensuring an almost certain death, were enough to make the bravest man hesitate.'

The first of those brave men onto the Mole were from the Royal Navy landing party. This comprised eight officers and 200 seamen, the men being further organised into four groups of fifty men. Groups 'A' and 'B' were assigned to *Vindictive*, Group 'C' was onboard *Iris*, with Group 'D' on *Daffodil*. Each group had different tasks to undertake. These included securing ships alongside the Mole, positioning of the brows on the Mole, or forming the first assault force to provide covering fire for the Royal Marines as they landed on the Mole. The seamen had also been ordered to destroy a gun battery at the end of the Mole and to attack German vessels that were moored on the inner Mole.

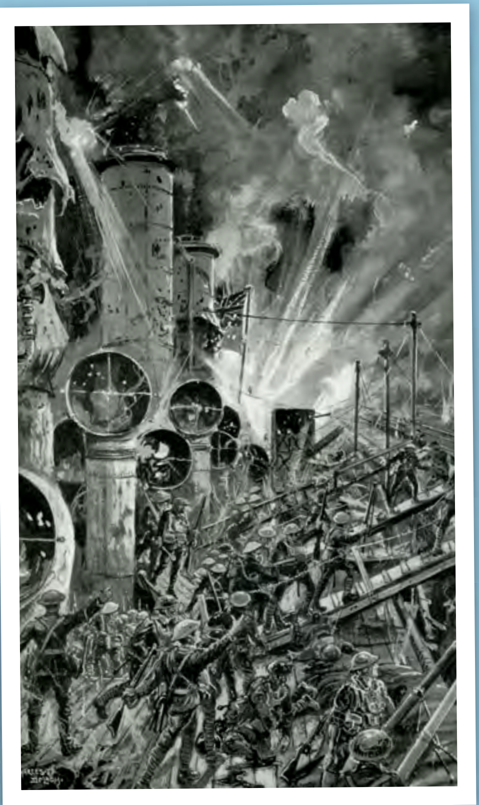
As if these tasks were not enough, the naval ratings were also expected to light the end of the Mole with a beacon, known as a red Bengal light, in an effort to help guide the blockships into the harbour. There were also sections manning Stokes mortars which were to do as much damage as they could to the port's facilities, though their main aim was to distract the enemy as the blockships steamed into the harbour.

HORRIBLE HAND-TO-HAND FIGHTING

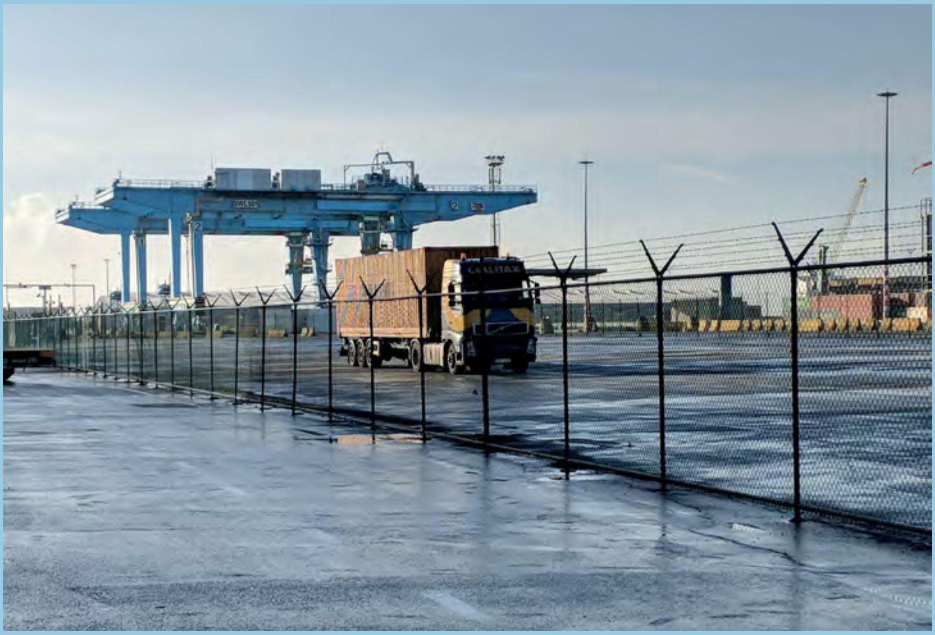
The storming party began ascending the yawing brows, climbing over the bodies of the dead and wounded who had been hit during the approach to the Mole. These included Lieutenant H. Walker RN, who had been severely wounded; amongst other injuries Walker had one of his hands shot off. Captain Carpenter had noticed that Walker had fallen at the top of the ladder leading from the upper deck to the brow platform. 'The storming parties were running over him in the dark en route to the brows. Finding I was unable to drag him clear without impeding the men



The only significant surviving part of the original Mole at Zeebrugge is that seen here – the last stretch to the lighthouse. During the attack, HMS *Vindictive* approached from the right of this view, and came alongside the Mole near where the bank of three cranes can be seen in the centre. The port itself has expanded massively since the First World War – as is evident in this picture – with most of the Mole having been subsumed into the new harbour area.
(Historic Military Press)



This drawing by the artist Charles de Lacey, entitled *Storming the Mole*, shows Royal Marines using the gangways to reach the Mole. The scene was based on information supplied to de Lacey by Captain Alfred F.B. Carpenter VC, RN, the commander of HMS *Vindictive*. (Historic Military Press)



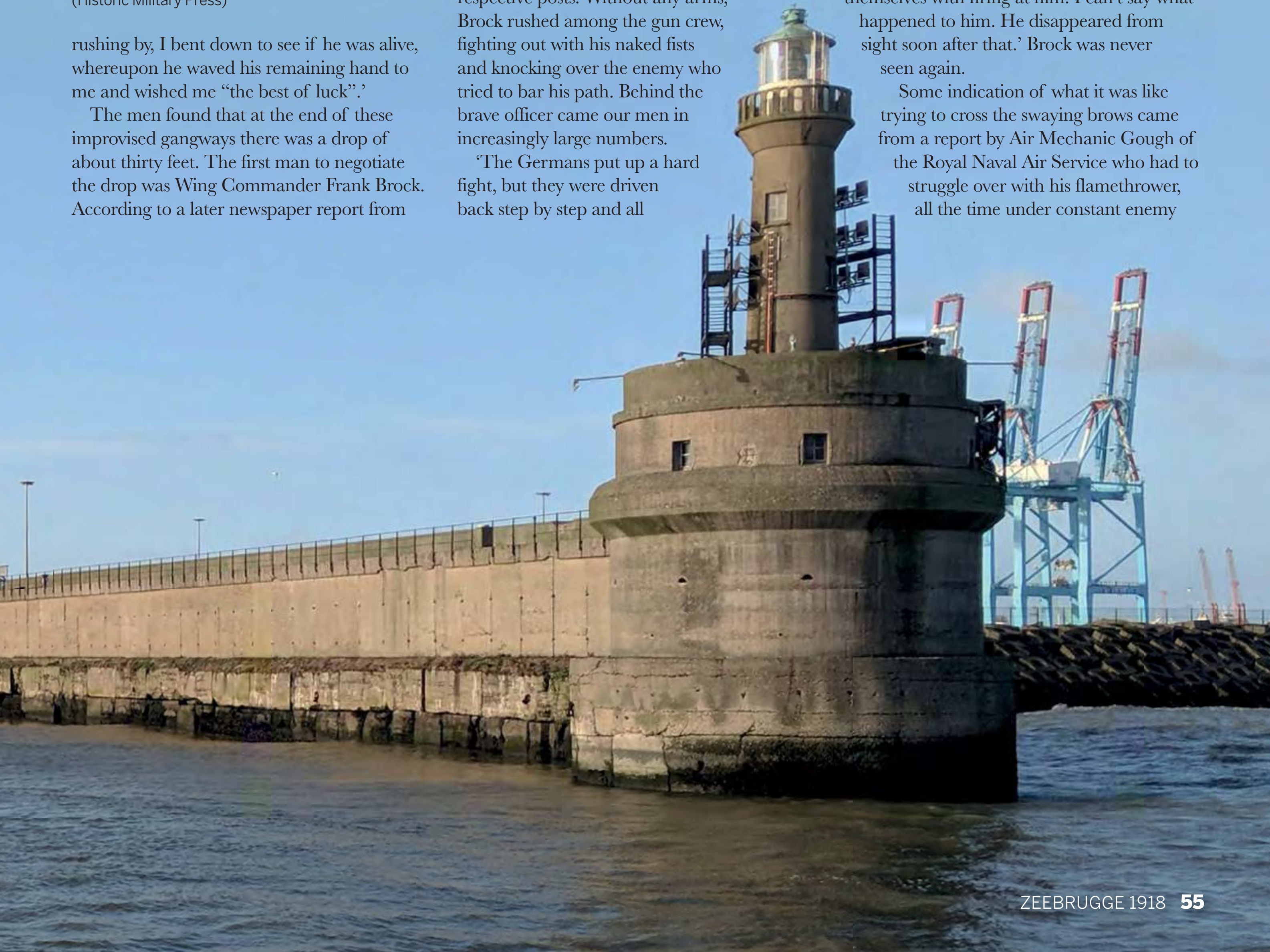
A view of the greatly-expanded Zeebrugge Docks taken from a spot near the Port Control Office. The mesh fence that can be seen in the foreground follows the line of the seaward edge of the original Mole. The lorry marks the approximate position where HMS *Vindictive* came alongside the Mole during the raid. (Historic Military Press)

rushing by, I bent down to see if he was alive, whereupon he waved his remaining hand to me and wished me “the best of luck”.’

The men found that at the end of these improvised gangways there was a drop of about thirty feet. The first man to negotiate the drop was Wing Commander Frank Brock. According to a later newspaper report from an unidentified NCO, ‘He called the men behind to follow on and made straight for the German gun in position just a few yards away and then getting ready to open fire on our ships swinging into position at their respective posts. Without any arms, Brock rushed among the gun crew, fighting out with his naked fists and knocking over the enemy who tried to bar his path. Behind the brave officer came our men in increasingly large numbers.

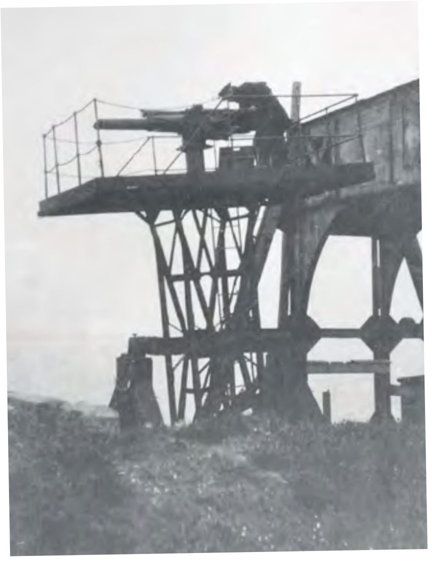
‘The Germans put up a hard fight, but they were driven back step by step and all through one of the finest fights I have ever seen there was Commander Brock letting Jerry have it with his fists. Every time he got his fist a Fritz went home or at least went down. Very soon they gave him a wide berth, contenting themselves with firing at him. I can’t say what happened to him. He disappeared from sight soon after that.’ Brock was never seen again.

Some indication of what it was like trying to cross the swaying brows came from a report by Air Mechanic Gough of the Royal Naval Air Service who had to struggle over with his flamethrower, all the time under constant enemy



fire: 'It was a nerve-trying experience – walking along narrow gangways with a hand-rail one side only, encumbered by a decidedly heavy equipment and being shelled the while by heavy guns at close range – not more than 100 yards. Some of the shells were actually sweeping the deck, clearing the wall of the Mole and the gangways by a few inches only. The noise was of course terrific.'

An unidentified German naval officer who had returned from a U-boat patrol found himself caught up in the attack: 'I have never seen such horrible hand-to-hand fighting as took place on the Zeebrugge Mole. The sailors from the *Vindictive* swarmed down, and many of the defenders, taken by surprise, were unarmed. I saw an Englishman bayonet a German through the body, and then the dying man sank his teeth in the throat of his adversary.'



Part of the German defences at Zeebrugge – a 22-pounder naval gun mounted on a rocking platform on the Mole. (USNHHC)

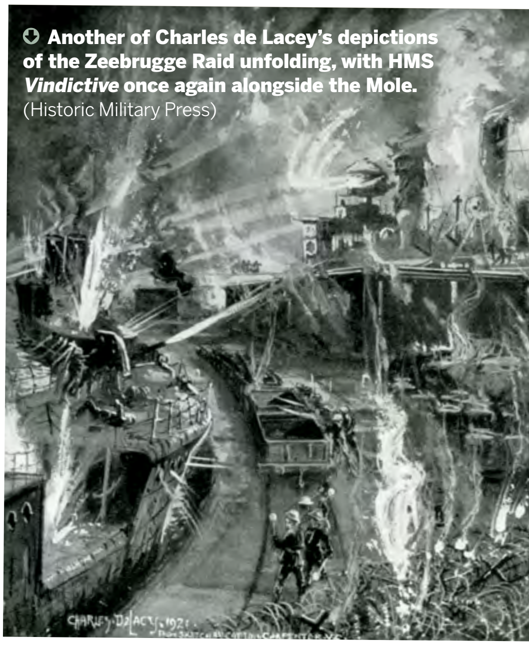
In the dark, illuminated by the flashes of guns and grenades and the constant glare of the searchlights, the officers struggled to keep order amongst their groups, as Lieutenant Commander Adams experienced as he led his men ashore: 'At this time it seemed to me the enemy was firing at the ship from the shore-end of the Mole, though I saw no gun flashes. The whole Mole was lighted by German star shells, and was well lighted all the time … After getting to the lookout station I rallied my men and found I had only about seven, and advanced round and past it, and about 40 yards along the parapet, the machine gun towards the three-gun battery firing at us, several men being hit …

'I endeavoured to get more men up to rush the parapet. I saw several men here when we went round the lookout station, who fired at us and retired, and fired again … We also threw hand bombs with effect at some enemy seen on the Mole. By now I had only four or five men left, and no one in support.'

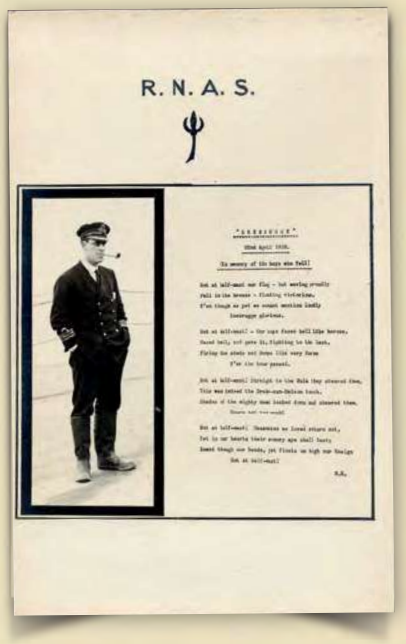
DYING AT THEIR POSTS

Able Seaman Bernard Devlin was part of the demolition party that climbed over *Vindictive* from *Daffodil* to reach the Mole: 'The splendid achievement at Zeebrugge was won because every man knew how to use his fists … I went over the specially constructed landing stage [one of the brows] on my hands and knees and when I got on the Mole was surprised to think how I had escaped injury. Others, however, were less fortunate, for I saw a lot shot down. The place in fact was an inferno. Machine gun bullets whizzed above us and past us, shells burst over our heads, gas choked those men who in the excitement had allowed their respirators to slip from their faces.'

Once on the Mole, Devlin and his party charged along the parapet towards the concrete gun emplacements in an attempt to silence the guns: 'With cutlass drawn in one hand and a bomb in the other, each one of us rushed along the Mole towards the concrete gun stations.

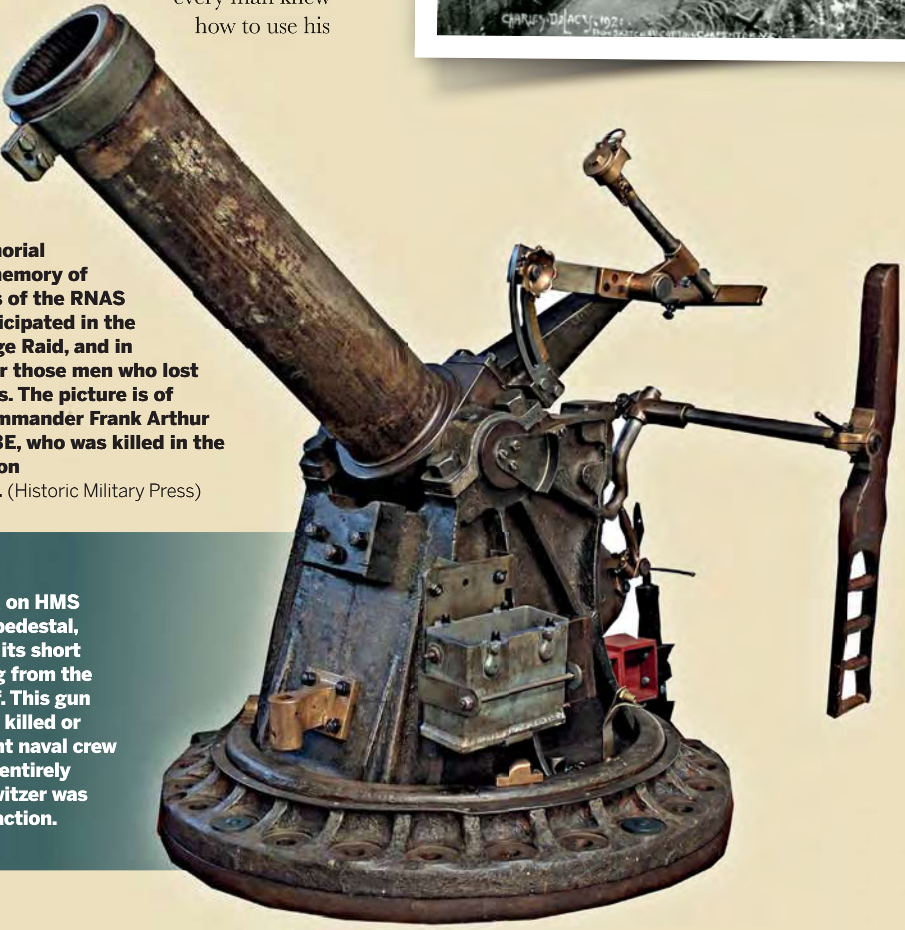


Another of Charles de Lacey's depictions of the Zeebrugge Raid unfolding, with HMS *Vindictive* once again alongside the Mole. (Historic Military Press)



R. N. A. S.

A memorial card in memory of members of the RNAS who participated in the Zeebrugge Raid, and in particular those men who lost their lives. The picture is of Wing Commander Frank Arthur Brock OBE, who was killed in the fighting on the Mole. (Historic Military Press)

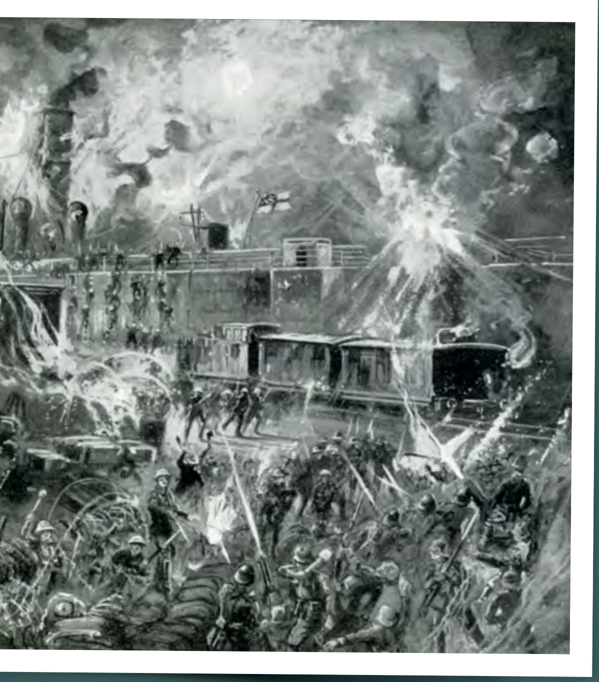


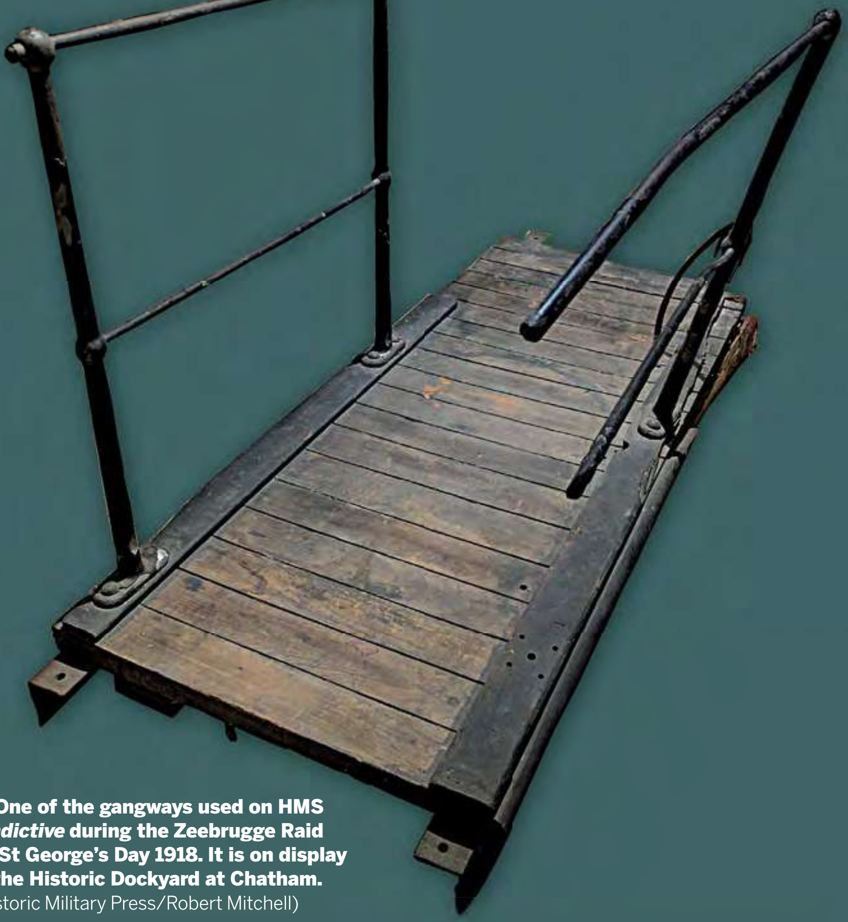
BL 7.5IN HOWITZER MK 1

A Breech Loading 7.5-inch Howitzer Mk.I that was fitted on HMS *Vindictive* for the Zeebrugge Raid. Mounted on a circular pedestal, this particular weapon was chosen for the purpose due to its short range and high trajectory, which made it suitable for firing from the decks of *Vindictive* over the high wall on to the Mole itself. This gun was manned by a Royal Marine Artillery crew, who were all killed or wounded in the very early part of the action. A replacement naval crew from a 6-inch gun took their place, only to also be almost entirely wiped out. After this, a third naval crew took over. The howitzer was removed from *Vindictive* on her return to Dover after the action. (Historic Military Press/Robert Mitchell)

Those Germans who tried to get away by taking to their heels were blown to atoms by our bombs which we pelted at them. No quarter was shown.

‘German gunners concealed in their concrete batteries were bombed out. Those who showed fight were slain by cutlass. It was a case of teeth, feet, hands or anything, I got into close quarters with these surprised Germans, and like my colleagues, what the bomb failed to do the cutlass accomplished. Any German who showed his head was a dead man. Slashing right and left with the cutlass, and banging their concrete gun emplacements with bombs, we put seven guns out of action before we reached our first objective – the lighthouse.’





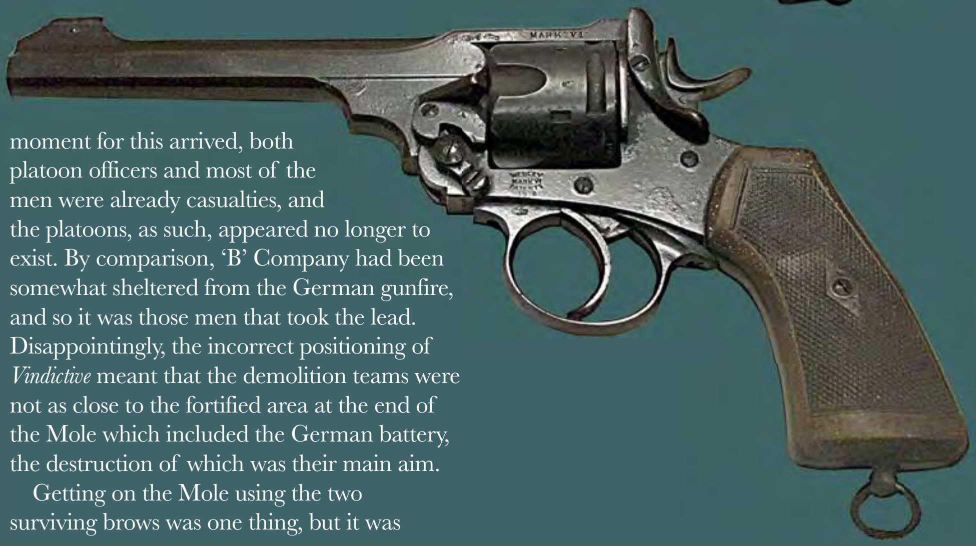
One of the gangways used on HMS *Vindictive* during the Zeebrugge Raid on St George’s Day 1918. It is on display in the Historic Dockyard at Chatham. (Historic Military Press/Robert Mitchell)

One sailor from the demolition team rushed up towards the steps of the lighthouse and used a bomb to demolish its lantern. Devlin recalled that, ‘The lighthouse was stormed and battered with bombs. The lantern was soon demolished, and afterwards the whole structure was completely wrecked. If there were any Germans in charge of this lighthouse then they surely died at their posts.’

It was then the turn of the Marines to land, but *Vindictive* had berthed much further southwards along the Mole than had been intended. This meant that the Marines who were to attack the northern end of the Mole would have further to travel and would meet more opposition. The plan of attack was therefore hurriedly changed. But to add to the complications the Marines faced was the news that ‘C’ Company, from Plymouth, which was designated to lead the Marine contingent onto the Mole, had been on the starboard side of *Vindictive* and had suffered heavy casualties, the men being terribly exposed to the enemy fire as the cruiser approached the Mole. The plan was for No.10 and 11 Platoons of ‘C’ Company to land first, but when the moment for this arrived, both platoon officers and most of the men were already casualties, and the platoons, as such, appeared no longer to exist. By comparison, ‘B’ Company had been somewhat sheltered from the German gunfire, and so it was those men that took the lead. Disappointingly, the incorrect positioning of *Vindictive* meant that the demolition teams were not as close to the fortified area at the end of the Mole which included the German battery, the destruction of which was their main aim.

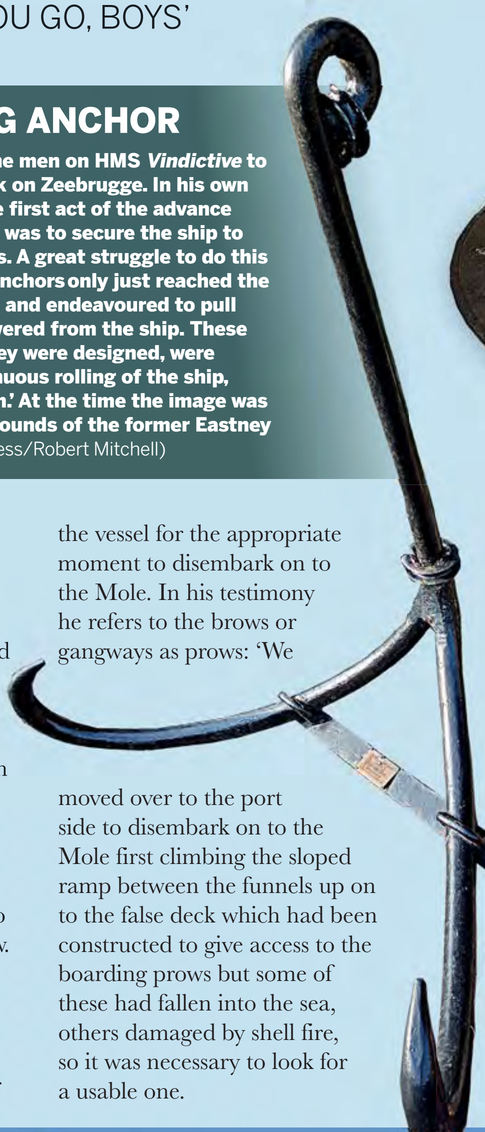
Getting on the Mole using the two surviving brows was one thing, but it was

Part of the Royal Marines Museum collection, this Webley and Scott 1-inch signal pistol was used on HMS *Vindictive* during the Zeebrugge Raid. (Historic Military Press/Robert Mitchell)



The Webley Mk.VI .455-inch revolver which, dated 1918, was used by Private J.G. McLaverty during the Zeebrugge Raid. McLaverty landed at Zeebrugge from *Iris*. (Historic Military Press/Robert Mitchell)

VINDICTIVE GRAPPLING ANCHOR



One of the grappling anchors used by the men on HMS *Vindictive* to come alongside the Mole during the attack on Zeebrugge. In his own account, Captain Carpenter VC wrote: 'The first act of the advance party, in accordance with the instructions, was to secure the ship to the wall by means of the grappling anchors. A great struggle to do this was undertaken. The foremost grappling anchors only just reached the Mole. Some men sat on the top of the wall and endeavoured to pull the grapnels over the top as they were lowered from the ship. These grapnels, by virtue of the use for which they were designed, were heavy. That fact, combined with the continuous rolling of the ship, made it extremely difficult to control them.' At the time the image was taken, this anchor was on display in the grounds of the former Eastney Barracks at Portsmouth. (Historic Military Press/Robert Mitchell)

quite another to get from the Mole parapet on to the main Mole surface below, a situation not helped by the ground being slippery from the heavy rain that was falling. The problem the landing parties experienced was described by Private James Feeney: 'The sea-face of it stands about twenty-five feet over high water, the outer face, for about four feet deep, is three feet higher than inside. When I got off the outer face, and stepped down on the promenade portion, I thought it was the Mole proper; but when we moved over to a three-foot railing and looked down, we could see what appeared to be a very wide street about twenty feet below. Then I knew what the ladders were for. We had some trouble here. It was ten minutes before I got a ladder to go down by.'

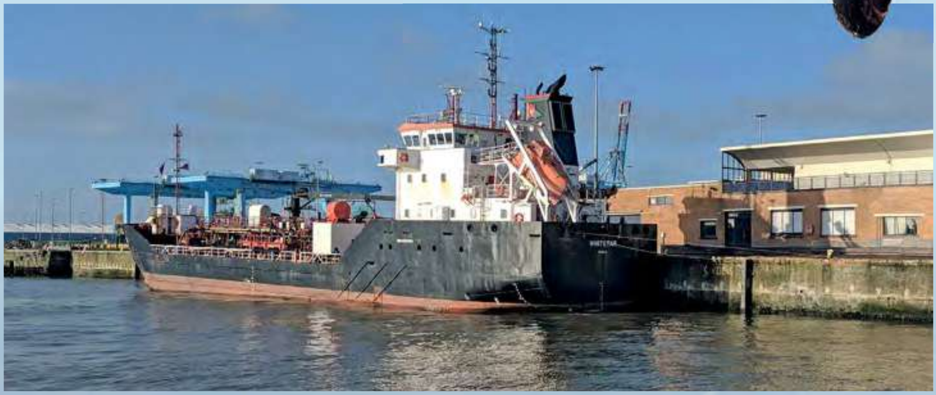
A member of No.12 Platoon, Private Philip Hodgson had to judge the motion of the vessel for the appropriate moment to disembark on to the Mole. In his testimony he refers to the brows or gangways as prows: 'We moved over to the port side to disembark on to the Mole first climbing the sloped ramp between the funnels up on to the false deck which had been constructed to give access to the boarding prows but some of these had fallen into the sea, others damaged by shell fire, so it was necessary to look for a usable one.

The helmet worn by Lieutenant (later Major General) C. Lamplough, during the Zeebrugge Raid. Lamplough was a member of the 4th Battalion Royal Marines, which was raised specially for the attack. Lamplough, a veteran of the Gallipoli Campaign, was awarded the DSO for his actions at Zeebrugge. (Historic Military Press/Robert Mitchell)

'These prows were formed of baulks of timber bolted together in pairs to form a gangway some 18 inches wide and 15 feet long, the inner half fastened down with a slight rising slope on the false deck, it had a hinge at the outer end by which a similar pair of baulks were attached to the inboard part, but the outer end of the second prow had to rest on the parapet wall of the Mole, but it was not all just so simple as that, the inner part rose and fell vertically as waves lifted the ship, whereas the outer half pivoted like a see-saw about the end resting on the Mole so after finding a prow in good order it was necessary to pause and watch this double motion and then make a dash.

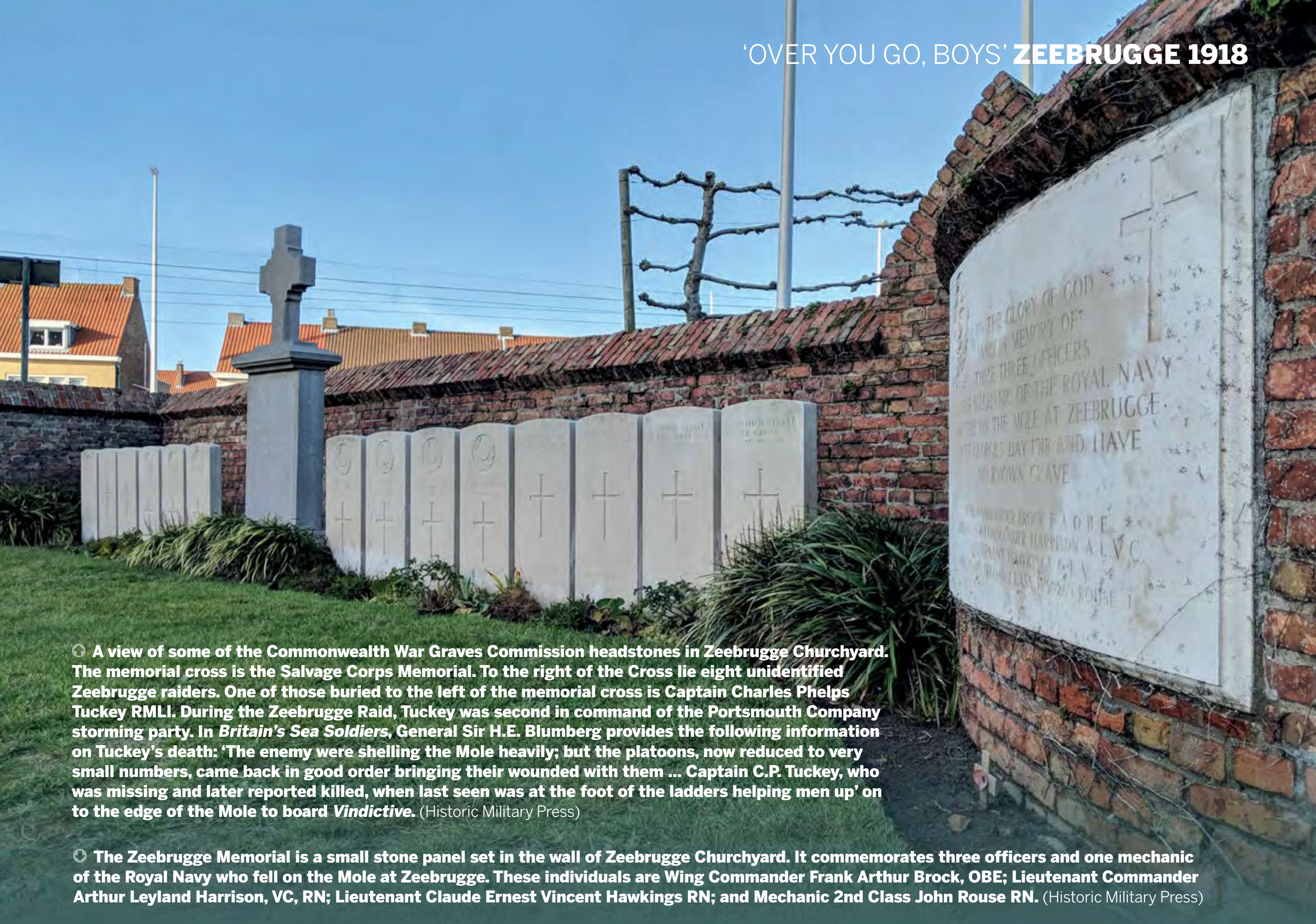
'Loaded as I was with full equipment, small arms, ammunition, rifle and two panniers, with four trays of Lewis gun bullets, it was not easy but somehow I scrambled over and dropped off the parapet wall, almost alongside RSM [Charles] Thatcher. He was attempting single-handed to lift a heavy wooden ladder which had been brought in *Vindictive* over the iron railing, along the inner side of the footway to enable us to get down on to the main part of the Mole.

'"Give me a hand lad," he shouted, so I dropped my rifle and the panniers and together we soon had the ladder over, "Now



The MV *Whitstar* berthed on the inside of the old Mole at Zeebrugge. *Whitstar* is tied up approximately where the German torpedo-boat *V69* was located at the time of the raid. The building to the right of *Whitstar* is the Port Control Office. HMS *Vindictive* came alongside roughly on the opposite side of the Port Control Office towards the crane that can just be seen in the centre. (Historic Military Press)

This view of Zeebrugge Harbour was taken near the Port Control Office; the photographer was standing on what was the outer edge of the Mole with his back to where HMS *Vindictive* had roughly came alongside. On the opposite side of what would have been the old Mole is where the German torpedo-boat *V69* was berthed, just beyond the black drums. (Historic Military Press)



A view of some of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstones in Zeebrugge Churchyard. The memorial cross is the Salvage Corps Memorial. To the right of the Cross lie eight unidentified Zeebrugge raiders. One of those buried to the left of the memorial cross is Captain Charles Phelps Tuckey RMLI. During the Zeebrugge Raid, Tuckey was second in command of the Portsmouth Company storming party. In *Britain's Sea Soldiers*, General Sir H.E. Blumberg provides the following information on Tuckey's death: 'The enemy were shelling the Mole heavily; but the platoons, now reduced to very small numbers, came back in good order bringing their wounded with them ... Captain C.P. Tuckey, who was missing and later reported killed, when last seen was at the foot of the ladders helping men up' on to the edge of the Mole to board *Vindictive*. (Historic Military Press)

The Zeebrugge Memorial is a small stone panel set in the wall of Zeebrugge Churchyard. It commemorates three officers and one mechanic of the Royal Navy who fell on the Mole at Zeebrugge. These individuals are Wing Commander Frank Arthur Brock, OBE; Lieutenant Commander Arthur Leyland Harrison, VC, RN; Lieutenant Claude Ernest Vincent Hawkings RN; and Mechanic 2nd Class John Rouse RN. (Historic Military Press)

off you go, it is safer down there," so picking up my things I was soon down on the main part of the Mole, moments later, the RSM was badly wounded, was got back on board *Vindictive* but had to have a leg amputated.'

'IT WAS FAIR SLAUGHTER'

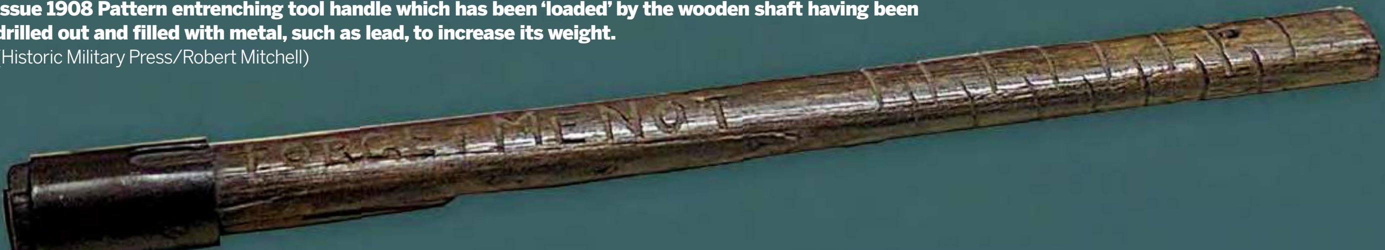
With all the officers from No.10 Platoon either dead or wounded, responsibility for leading the survivors from the platoon fell upon the shoulders of Sergeant Harry Wright: 'Up the ramp we dashed, carrying our ladders and ropes, passing over dead and wounded lying everywhere, and avoiding big gaps made in the ship's decks by shell fire. Finally, we crossed the two remaining gangways, which were only just hanging together, and jumped onto the concrete wall, only to find it swept by machine gun fire. Our casualties were so great before the landing that out of a platoon of forty-five men only twelve landed. No.9 Platoon, led by Lieutenant Lamplough, had also about the same number.

'We hastily dropped our ladders and ropes to the lower part of the Mole,' continued Wright, 'and two men at once slithered down the twenty-foot drop and rushed across to the shed on the far side. Everyone was anxious to get out of the deadly machine gun fire. While we were scrambling down the ladders, a few Germans rushed across the Mole with hand grenades, but it was our turn now, and not one of them got half-way across'.

DEUTSCHER EHRENFRIEDHOF ZEEBRUGGE

The original First World War German plaque and inscription on the entrance archway to Zeebrugge Churchyard, which can be found on Sint Donaasstraat. The cemetery was built by the Germans and contains 172 of their men, as well some of the Allied personnel who fell in the St George's Day attack. The Zeebrugge Memorial, the smallest CWGC memorial in the world (see top image above), is to the right of the archway as you look at it, on the inside of the wall. (Historic Military Press)

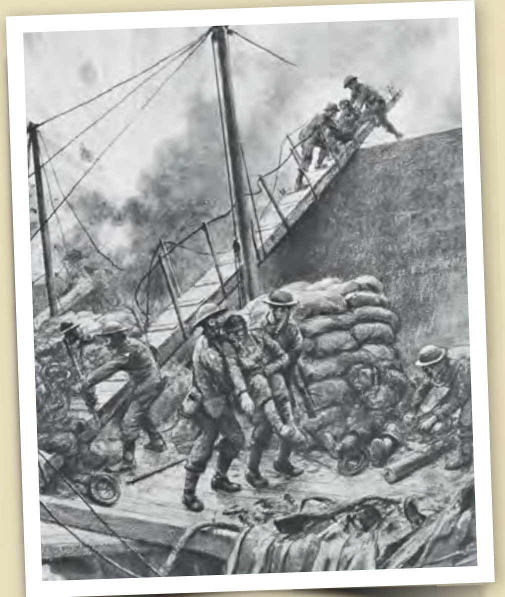
This entrenching tool handle was modified and carried on the Zeebrugge Raid in April 1918 by Lance Corporal George Calverley. Each man who landed on the Mole carried at least two hand grenades and a weighted club, such as that seen here, for hand-to-hand fighting. This is a standard issue 1908 Pattern entrenching tool handle which has been 'loaded' by the wooden shaft having been drilled out and filled with metal, such as lead, to increase its weight. (Historic Military Press/Robert Mitchell)



FOR MOST CONSPICUOUS GALLANTRY

The memorial to Lieutenant Commander Arthur Leyland Harrison VC which is located on Roundham Head at Paignton, Torbay. Born in Torquay on 3 February 1886, a pre-war England rugby international, Harrison was killed during the Zeebrugge Raid, his part for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross. (Robert Mitchell)

Moving as swiftly as possible, Lamplough captured and consolidated positions close to No.3 Shed, at the same time ensuring that the enemy was prevented from approaching westward along the Mole. Some of the Marines from No.11 Platoon assembled near the shed, where they prepared to launch an attack upon the German destroyer *V69* and two other warships berthed alongside the inner Mole, while demolition teams prepared the shed for destruction.



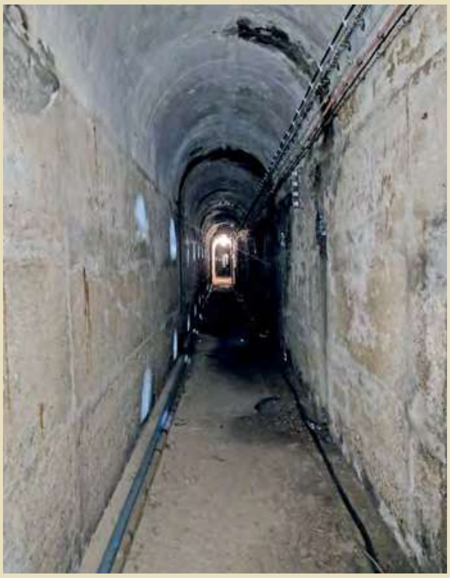
Some of the wounded are carried back down from the Mole to HMS *Vindictive*'s deck. (Historic Military Press)

An officer from the Plymouth Company was involved in the attack upon the German warships: 'Three German destroyers lay alongside the other side of the Mole, and all three of them kept firing at *Vindictive* at close range. From these destroyers a number of German sailors swarmed up to attack us, but they found themselves face to face with British bayonets, and with a shout our men charged them. This was more than Fritz could stand. Clearing a space, we dashed to the first vessel into which we threw some fifty hand-bombs. A loud explosion followed, and the last we saw of the destroyer was that she was on fire and sinking. We were unable to reach the other two destroyers.'

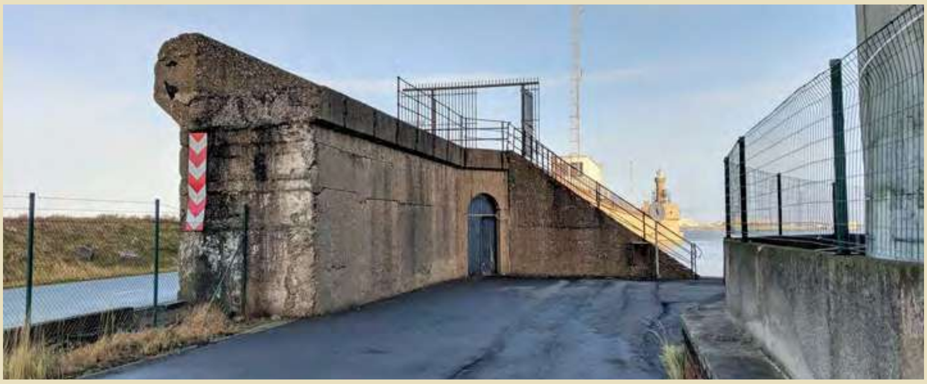
Another Marine described the attack upon the German ships: 'It was then raining hard and our storming party was forming up when a big burly German loomed out of the semi-darkness and made a dive for the nearest men, but before he could do anything our captain, who was calmly walking up and down, knocked him on the head with his truncheon, with which some of us had been provided. He killed the man outright. On the other side of the Mole lay another destroyer. This vessel we destroyed, and we knocked on the head all the men who opposed us. We then received the order to charge and we rushed along the Mole to the shore. We bayonetted and shot all the men we came across.

'The noise of the firing mingled with the shouts and cries of the men was terrible. It was fair slaughter, and all around us was hubbub, but we kept our heads and put the wind up the Boche completely. He was fairly caught this time. Out in the harbour, the crews were taken completely by surprise. The coverings of their best guns had not been taken off and as the Germans scrambled up the hatchway from below, many of them only partially dressed and half-awake, were knocked on the head and tumbled back again. On shore we destroyed and dismantled all the guns we came across.'

Another Marine recorded the attack on the German ships: 'After bombing and setting alight the destroyer, we formed up and forced our way ashore at the point of the bayonet. We charged the gun crews on the beach which had been giving us so much trouble, and after killing a number [we] dispersed the rest and captured the guns. All around us we could hear the noise of the conflict, the cries and shrieks of the dying and wounded. It was horrible, but our men behaved magnificently.'



The tunnel that runs through the Mole parapet to the lighthouse at its end. (Historic Military Press)



The start of the only remaining stretch of the outer edge of the old Mole at Zeebrugge, with the lighthouse in the distance. It is against this concrete structure that HMS *Vindictive* went alongside, but a short distance behind the photographer. This picture was taken within what was the fortified zone. The whole area to the left beyond the mesh fence (the same fencing that can be seen in the picture on page 55), which is now reclaimed land, was open sea at the time of the attack. This picture shows why the gangways were needed to get up to the Mole edge from *Vindictive*, and then ladders to get down on to the Mole proper. The blue doorway that can be seen under the steps (which can also be seen on page 39), leads to the tunnel that runs the length of the Mole to the lighthouse. (Historic Military Press)

THE TERRIBLE CRIES OF THE MEN

As has been explained, one of the main objectives of the landing parties had been to attack and neutralize the German battery at the end of the Mole. This battery could potentially sink the blockships before they had entered the harbour so it was important that these guns were knocked out.

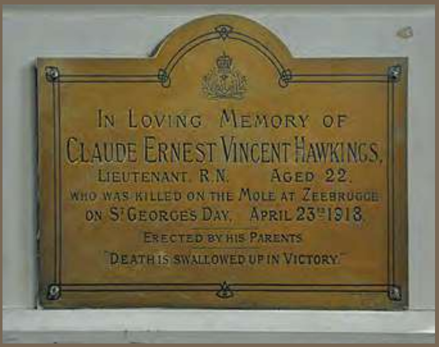
Lieutenant Commander Arthur Leyland Harrison, although already wounded, led an assault upon the Mole Battery. 'This officer was in immediate command of the Naval Storming Parties embarked in *Vindictive*,' ran the words of his subsequent citation for the Victoria Cross in *The London Gazette*. 'Immediately before coming alongside the Mole, Lieut.-Commander Harrison was struck on the head by a fragment of shell which broke his jaw and knocked him senseless. Recovering consciousness, he proceeded onto the Mole and took over command of his party, who were attacking the seaward end of the Mole.

'The silencing of the guns on the Mole head was of the first importance, and though in a position fully exposed to the enemy's machine gun fire Lieut.-Commander Harrison gathered his men together and led them to the attack. He was killed at the head of his men, all of whom were either killed or wounded.'

The Mole battery remained undamaged, and Captain Edward Bamford therefore assembled the survivors from Nos. 5, 7 and 8 platoons for a direct assault on the fortified area and the 4.1-inch battery. If this could be captured, the demolition party could get inside and destroy it.

It had been intended that *Vindictive* would go alongside near the fortified area at the end of the Mole, but it had berthed some 400 yards further down. As capturing or disabling the battery at the end of the Mole was potentially crucial to the success of the principal part of the operation, an attempt had to be made upon it, regardless of the circumstances.

Bamford discussed the situation with Captain A.R. Chater. 'All those men who belonged to the units which were to have attacked the fortified zone, therefore, now found themselves at No.3 Shed. No attack on the fortified zone had yet been made. As this was our principal objective, we decided to organise an attack on the fortified zone along the Mole. This involved attacking a fortified position across some two hundred yards of flat pavement devoid of any form of cover.'

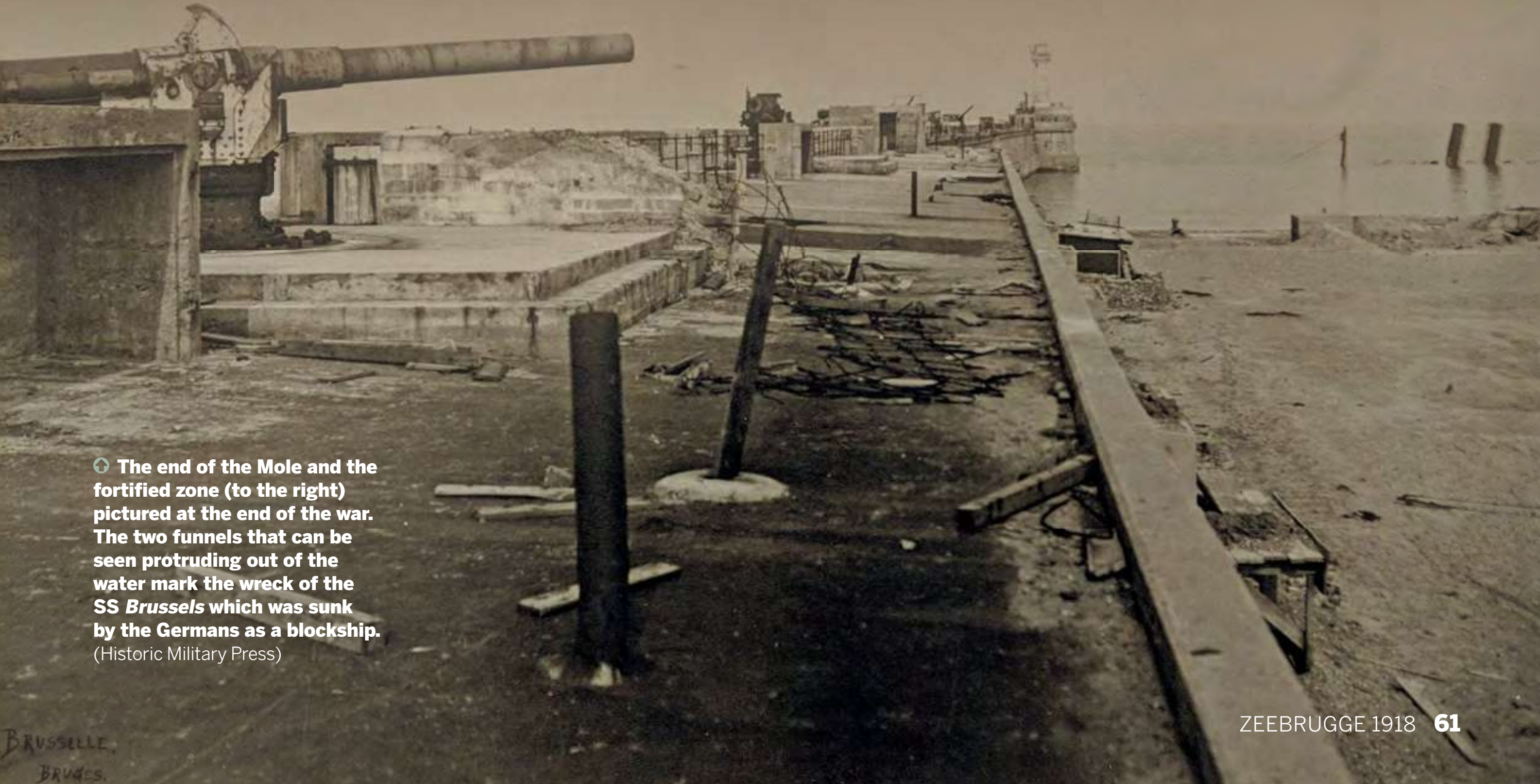

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
CLAUDE ERNEST VINCENT HAWKINGS,
LIEUTENANT, R.N. AGED 22,
WHO WAS KILLED ON THE MOLE AT ZEEBRUGGE
ON ST GEORGE'S DAY, APRIL 23RD 1918.
ERECTED BY HIS PARENTS
"DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY"

Located in St Andrew's Church in Hove, East Sussex, this plaque commemorates Lieutenant Claude Ernest Hawkings RN, who was killed on the Mole at Zeebrugge. Lieutenant Hawking made the first attempt to secure *Iris* alongside the Mole, as one account states: '[Lieutenant Hawkings] managed to get one ladder in position and actually reached the parapet, the ladder being crashed to pieces just as he stepped off it. This very gallant young officer was last seen defending himself with his revolver. He was killed on the parapet.' (Robert Mitchell)

A pedestal-mounted 1½-pounder Pom Pom gun from HMS *Vindictive*. On display at the IWM Duxford, the original caption states: 'One of the two pom-poms, along with six Lewis guns that were mounted on the foretop of the *Vindictive* for the attack on the Zeebrugge Mole ... It was manned by Lieutenant Charles N.B. Rigby (Royal Marine Artillery), and a crew of Royal Marines. Two heavy shells made direct hits on the fore-top, killing Lieutenant Rigby and killing or disabling all in the fore-top except Sergeant Norman Augustus Finch, who, though severely wounded, continued firing until the top was wrecked by another heavy shell.' (Historic Military Press/Robert Mitchell)

One of the Royal Marines who participated in this attack, who has not been identified, later recalled the following: 'We then received the order to charge, and we rushed along the Mole to the shore. We bayoneted and shot all the men we came across. The noise of the firing intermingled with the shouts and cries of the men was terrible. It was a fair slaughter, and all around us was hubbubs; but we kept our heads and put the wind up the Boche completely.'

It was as the men were charging headlong towards the Mole battery that the blast from *Vindictive*'s siren pierced the cacophony of the battle – it was the signal to retire.



The end of the Mole and the fortified zone (to the right) pictured at the end of the war. The two funnels that can be seen protruding out of the water mark the wreck of the SS *Brussels* which was sunk by the Germans as a blockship. (Historic Military Press)

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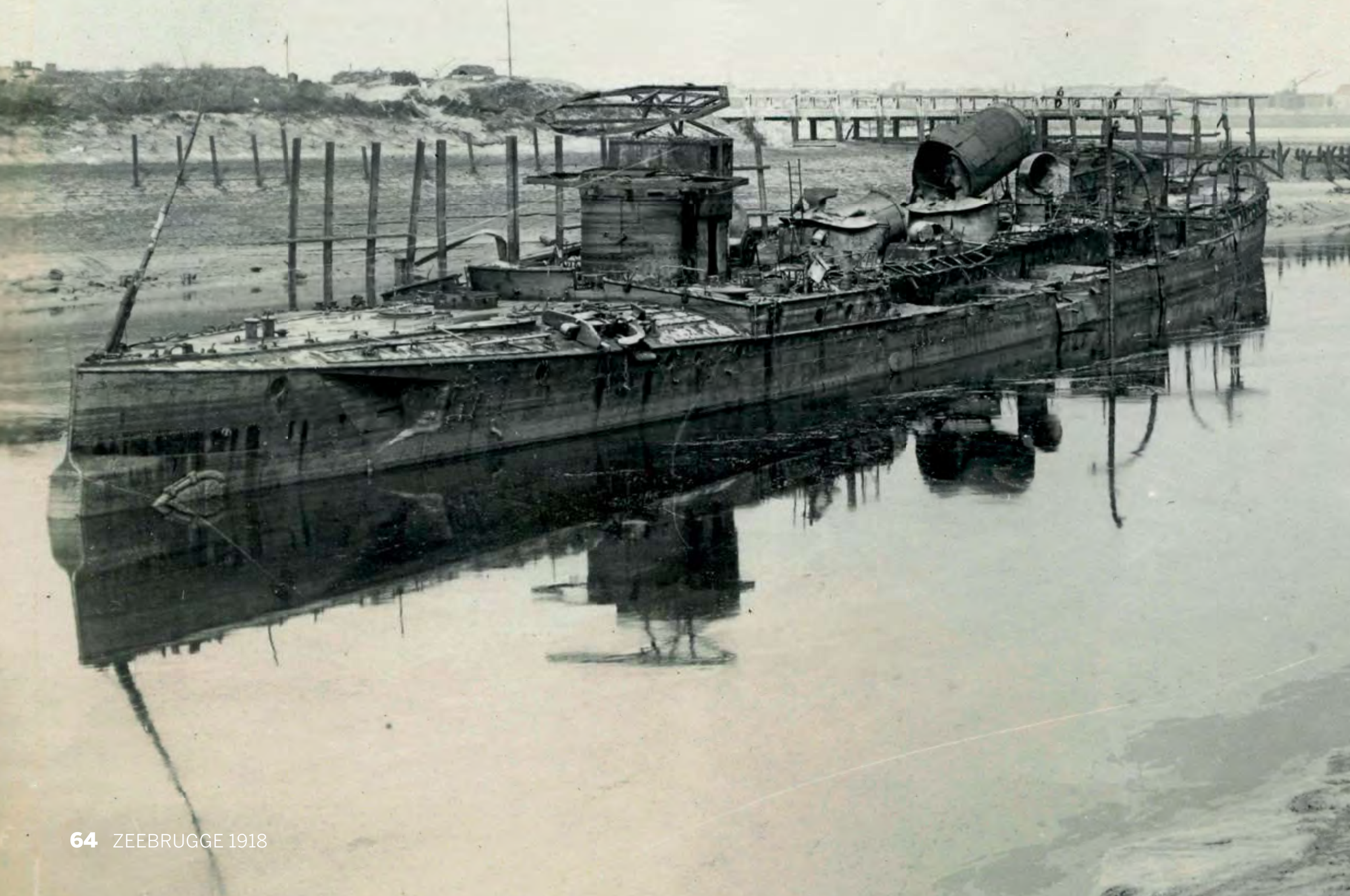
Blocking the Bruge Canal

As the battle raged on ship and shore, *Thetis, Intrepid* and *Iphigenia* steamed directly into Zeebrugge Harbour towards the entrance of the Bruges Canal to undertake the most important part of the operation.

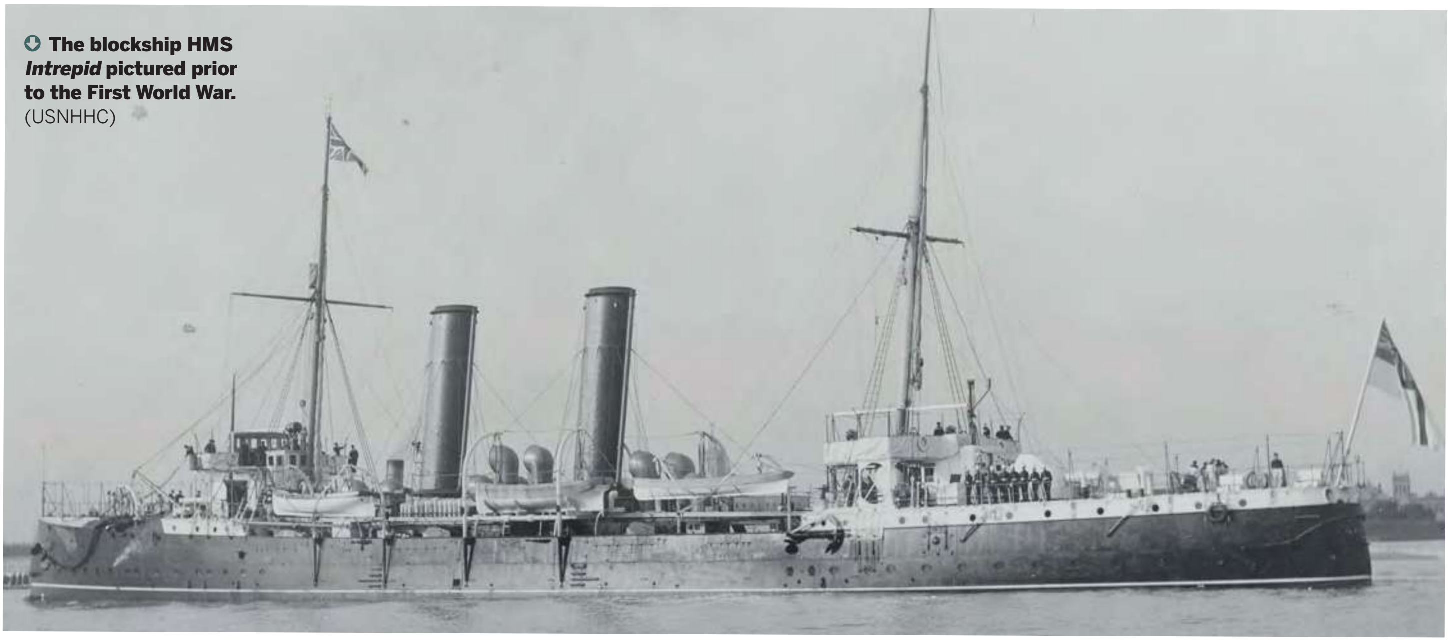
The efforts of all the men who had sailed to Zeebrugge through the intense fire of the German defenders, and of those who had stormed onto the Mole, were merely to distract or disable the enemy from engaging the blockships. As the battle raged all around, *Thetis* led the way past the end of the Mole and into the harbour. Commander Ralph Sneyd was in command on the bridge: 'About 12.20 sighted the Mole ahead. Altered course to port and signalled to ships astern. Light rockets fired by *Vindictive* showed up the Mole extension and lighthouse, and Captain Collins hailed the ship from a motor launch to give me the bearing of the lighthouse.'

As it happened, luck was on the raiders' side, for as they entered the harbour the gunners of the enemy batteries initially thought that they were German vessels. The German U-boat officer who found himself caught up in the attack later lamented that 'everything went wrong that night … As the blockships came in the junior officer of the land battery at one side of the entrance thought they were German torpedo boats and did not fire on them. Even so, it would have made no difference. He did not see them in time, at the speed they were going.'

Thetis was indeed going as fast as it could, with Lieutenant Commander Ronald Boddie down in the engine rooms: 'When we got near the *Vindictive*, which had then been secured to the Mole for 20 minutes, we came under heavy fire, and the telegraphs went to "Full" speed. I passed the order on to the boiler



The three blockships at Zeebrugge following the attack on St George's Day, 1918. In the foreground are *Intrepid* (left) and *Iphigenia* (right) and, beyond, *Thetis*. (Historic Military Press)



The blockship HMS *Intrepid* pictured prior to the First World War. (USNHHC)

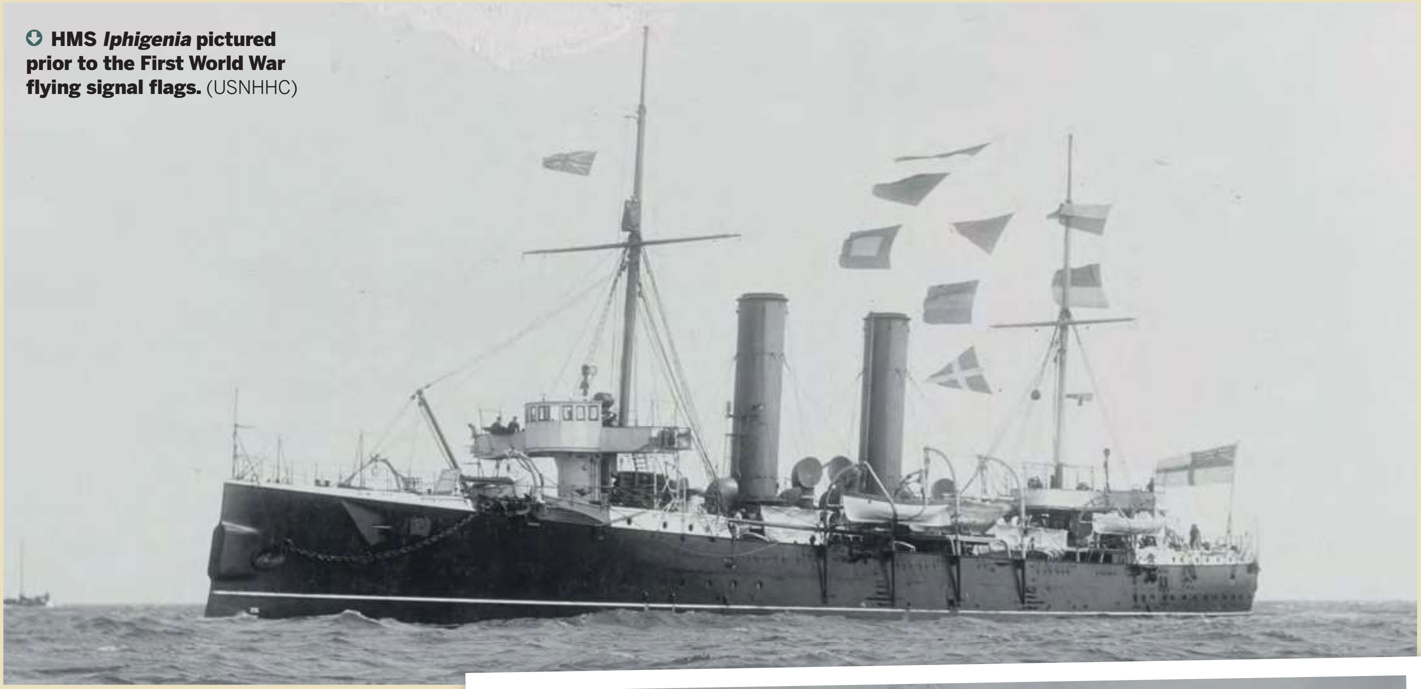
rooms, and as the engines gathered speed, with a crashing and banging noise, the general anxiety which prevailed, gave way to a thrill of excitement.

'The sudden increase of speed, caused the boilers to prime and the water coming over with the steam, made the engines pound loudly, and the piston rod glands gush boiling water. While this inferno of noise lasted it was impossible to distinguish between the noise of our own guns being discharged, and that from hits on the vessel.'

Boddie and Chief Engineer Room Artificer Frank Gale took an engine room apiece, each with a young ERA to assist. Frank Gale saw nothing of what was happening above deck: 'All we got in the engine room was splinters, smoke and gas. We put our gas masks on for a little while, but as they hampered our movements we took them off again. Although we were under heavy fire neither our engines or our lighting apparatus were damaged.'

RUNNING AGROUND

Thetis charged ahead at full speed through the harbour, aiming for the canal entrance, as Commander Sneyd detailed in his official report: 'Rounded the lighthouse and sighted the barge boom at the Mole head. Increased to full speed and signalled the ships astern. Steered for the end barge. Opened fire first at the lighthouse and then at the end of the barge of the boom. The ship was under a fairly heavy fire from the guns on the Mole extension, but I did not observe any firing from the 4.1-inch battery at the Mole head.



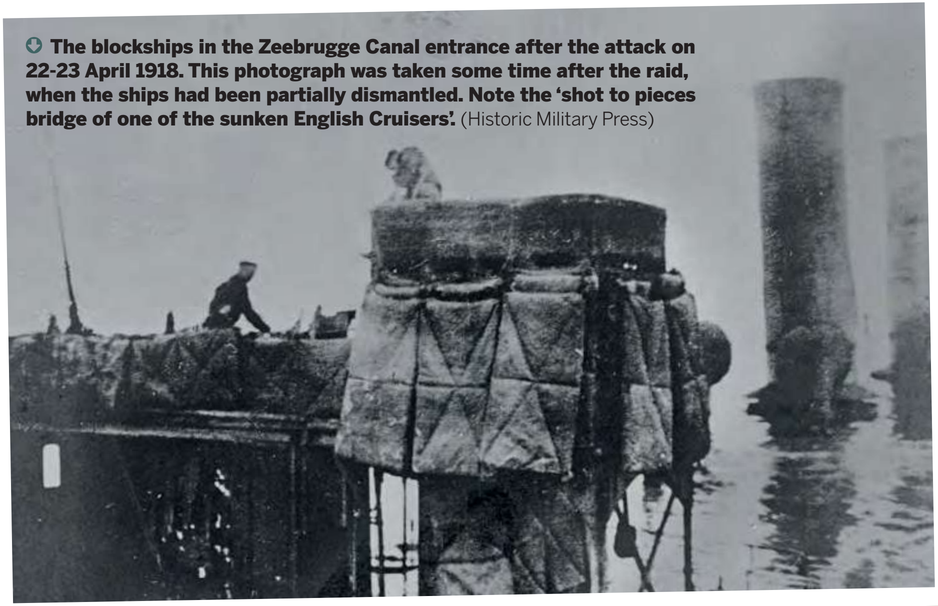
HMS *Iphigenia* pictured prior to the First World War flying signal flags. (USNHHC)

'As the ship approached the entrance between the barges and the net obstruction, I observed that she was swinging to port and accordingly put the helm hard-a-port, but failed to clear the nets, striking them between the two end buoys. The ship continued to forge ahead taking the nets with her, and the piers of the canal entrance were in sight when both engines were reported to have brought up.'

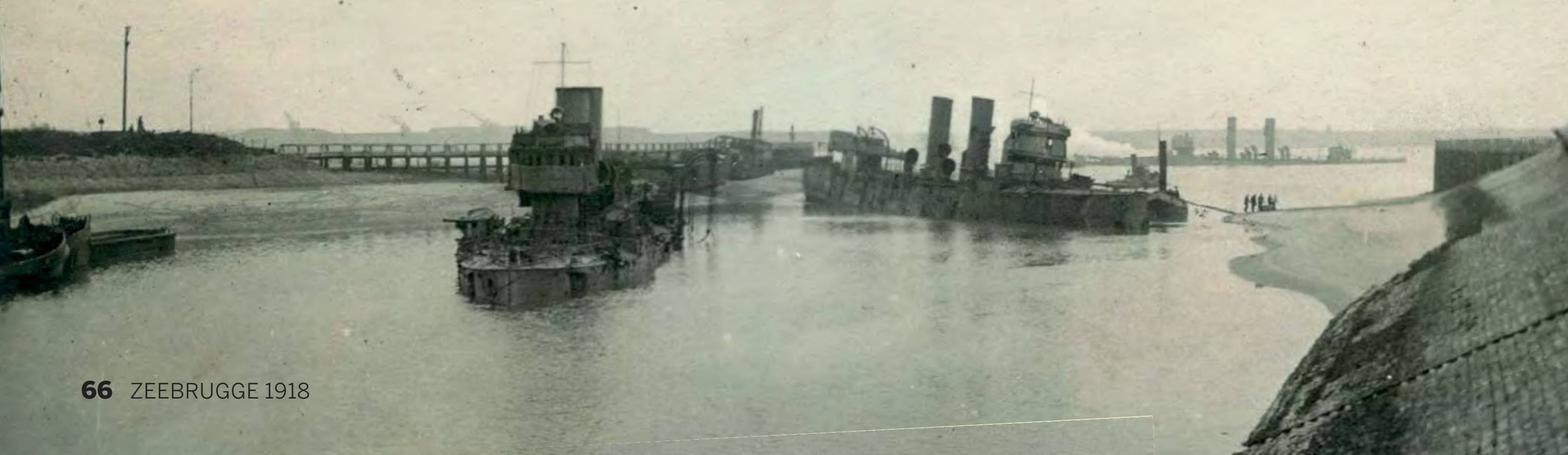
Thetis slowed and then halted. In the engine room, Boddie quickly realised what had happened: 'After pressing on like this for about 6 minutes, and I estimated we had attained our maximum speed of 16 knots, the Starboard engine suddenly came to a grinding stop, with steam and hot water gushing from every pore. A moment later the Port engine did the same. My first thought was that the steam pipes had been severed by gunfire, but a glance at the pressure gauges reassured me on that point. My next guess was that the ship had run aground, so I telephoned the Bridge to report the debacle, and to suggest that we had run aground.'

In fact, *Thetis*'s starboard propeller had snagged the harbour's boom defences and the cruiser was clearly going no further. Sneyd responded quickly, signalling to Lieutenant Stuart Bonham-Carter on *Intrepid*, 'We are aground – proceed ahead carry out orders'.

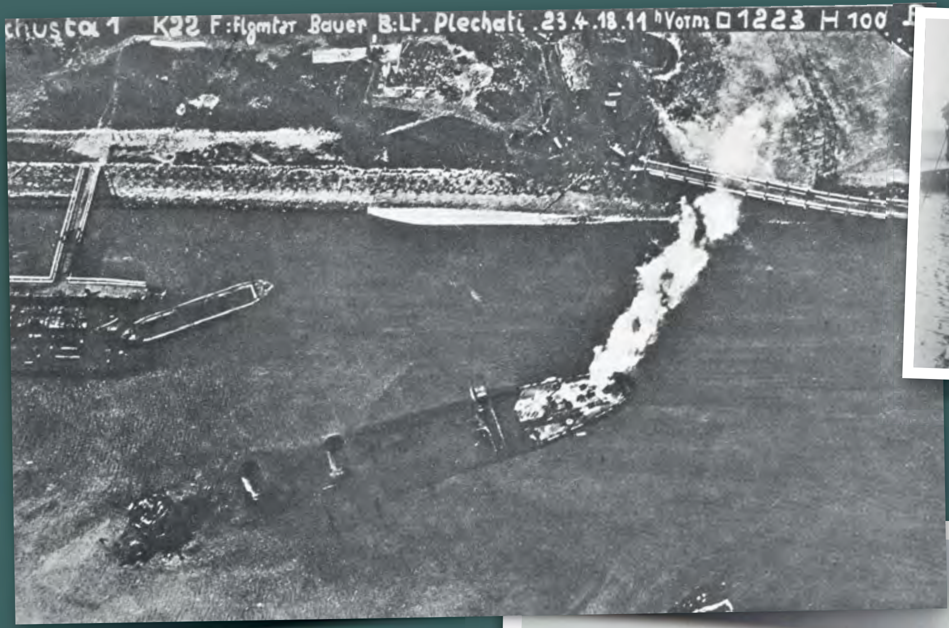
Sneyd now had to assess the situation his ship was in and consider his next course of action: 'The ship was now about 300 yards from the eastern pier head and after drifting slightly to port appeared to have grounded; she had a list to starboard side by the fire from the Mole. This fire still continued, either from guns on the Mole or from craft alongside it, and the ship was also hit several times by guns firing from the shore to the east of the canal entrance. One or two machine guns were also firing at the ship. The 6-inch gun on the forecastle engaged these guns until our own smoke made it impossible to see.'



The blockships in the Zeebrugge Canal entrance after the attack on 22-23 April 1918. This photograph was taken some time after the raid, when the ships had been partially dismantled. Note the 'shot to pieces bridge of one of the sunken English Cruisers'. (Historic Military Press)



The wrecks of *Intrepid* (left), *Iphigenia* (centre right) and, beyond, *Thetis*, pictured from the east bank of the canal entrance. This image shows how the canal was left virtually impassable at low tide. The brickwork on the right of this view can still be seen today, being accessible from the road named Paardenmarktstraat. (Paul Kendall Collection)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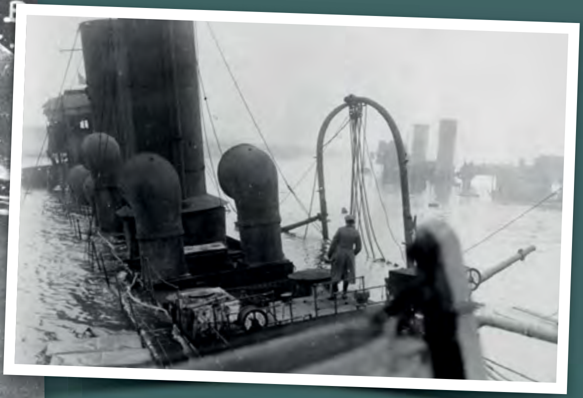
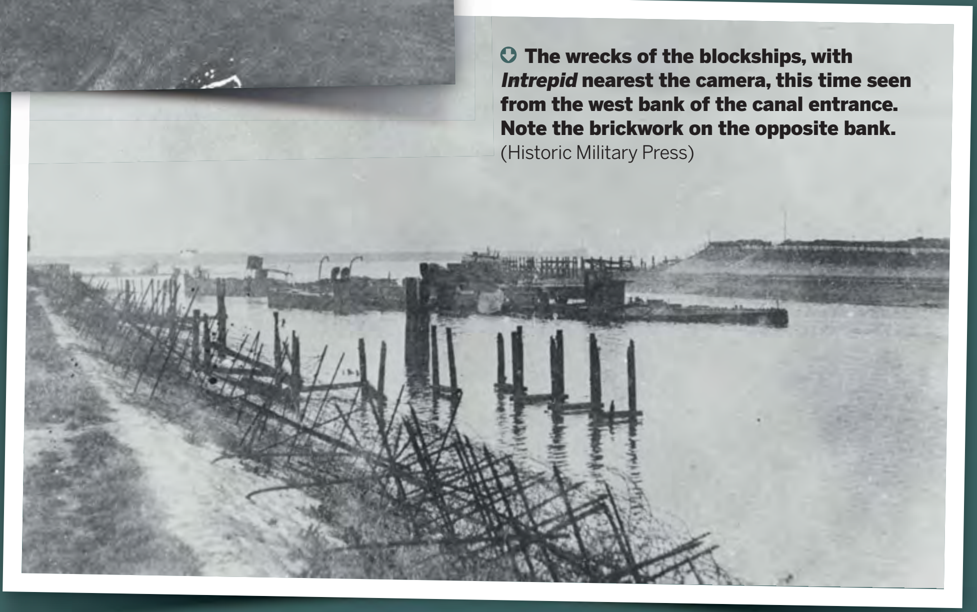
An aerial photograph taken from a German aircraft on 23 April 1918, in the immediate aftermath of the Zeebrugge Raid. This is the wreck of the blockship HMS *Iphigenia* sunk in the canal entrance and still on fire. (Historic Military Press)



A German officer examines the wreck of *Intrepid* from the deck of *Iphigenia* in the aftermath of the attack. The demolition of the wrecks has yet to begin. (NARA)



The wrecks of the blockships, with *Intrepid* nearest the camera, this time seen from the west bank of the canal entrance. Note the brickwork on the opposite bank. (Historic Military Press)

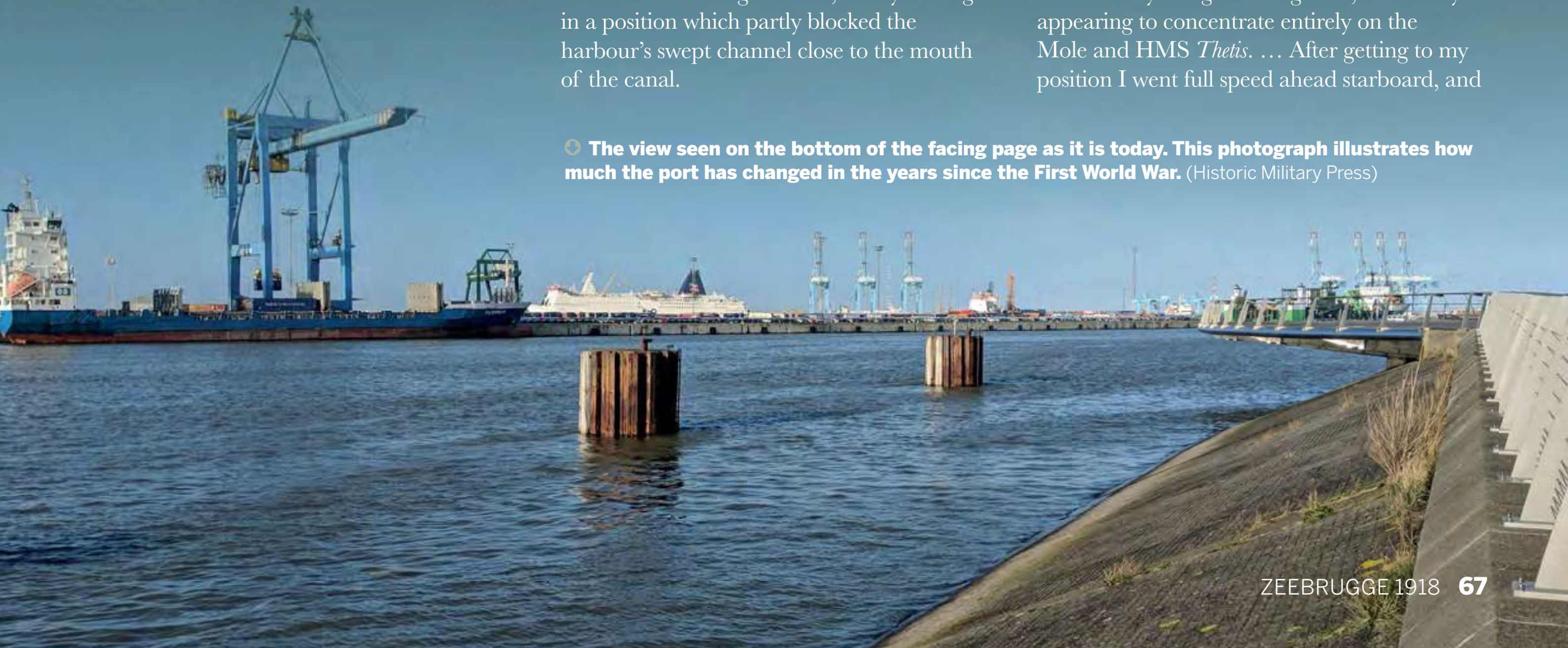
It was not because of smoke that the 6-inch gun stopped firing; it was because of a German shell. Leading-Stoker Norbert McCrory explained what happened as *Thetis* lay stationary in the inner harbour: 'Our forward gun was blown overboard taking [its] crew with it. We also had a shot go right through from starboard to port side, leaving a hole large enough for three men to walk through and just clearing the top of our engine room.'

Sneyd knew that his crew could do no more and he prepared to abandon ship. Enemy fire had disrupted communications throughout the ship and a message received by Boddie to attempt to restart the engines was out of date before it reached him. Although Boddie felt that such an attempt was futile, he obeyed, and with his team members tried to start the engines up, unaware that his captain had already given the order to abandon ship. To Boddie's astonishment both engines caught fire and the ship began to move sluggishly ahead – but there was no-one at the helm, Sneyd and his men having left the bridge.

When he noticed the ship was moving, Sneyd went back to the bridge, but arrived too late to prevent it grounding. In what was a remarkable piece of luck, *Thetis* travelled for half a mile in the correct direction, with no one on the bridge to steer, finally settling in a position which partly blocked the harbour's swept channel close to the mouth of the canal.

INTREPID AND IPHIGENIA

Behind *Thetis* was *Intrepid* commanded by Lieutenant Stuart Bonham-Carter: 'On approaching the Mole we came under heavy shrapnel fire and light flares – these were useless to the enemy on account of the smoke screen. After passing round the lighthouse on the Mole, we proceeded to the canal. HMS *Thetis* was seen aground on our port hand and she undoubtedly showed us the way in. We had very few guns firing at us, the enemy appearing to concentrate entirely on the Mole and HMS *Thetis*. … After getting to my position I went full speed ahead starboard, and

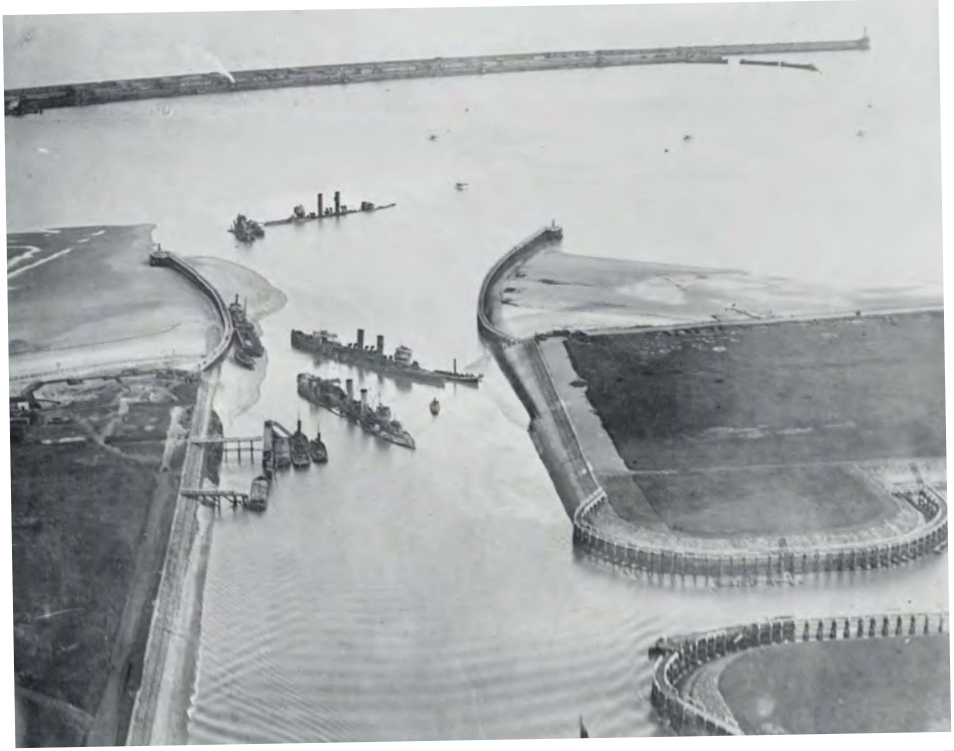


The view seen on the bottom of the facing page as it is today. This photograph illustrates how much the port has changed in the years since the First World War. (Historic Military Press) full steam astern port, helm hard a starboard.' *Thetis* had successfully reached her designated position.

Bringing up the rear was the last of the blockships, HMS *Iphigenia*. Her captain was Lieutenant Edward Billyard-Leake: 'On approaching the Mole we came under shrapnel fire and light flares, also two searchlights on the western end of the Mole. These flares were of no use to the enemy and simplified the navigation.

'On rounding the Mole, I lost station, so proceeded at full speed. Shortly after turning, the harbour was hit by star shell, which showed the *Intrepid* heading for the canal and *Thetis* aground. On approaching *Thetis*, a green light was shown on her starboard side, which enabled me to find the entrance to the canal.'

Lieutenant Meadows, a member of the American Red Cross, pictured standing at the canal lock entrance at Zeebrugge looking towards the wrecks of the blockships. This photograph was taken immediately after the advance of the Belgian Army late in 1918. (US Library of Congress; LC-A6196-8441)



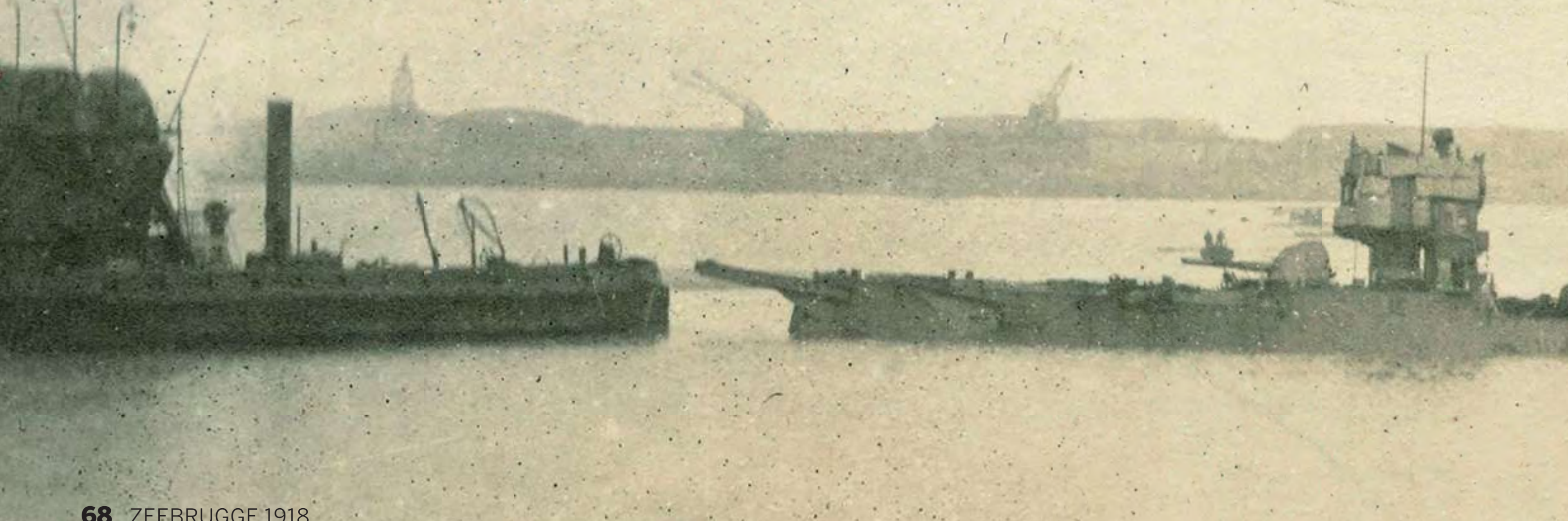
An oblique aerial photograph of the blockships at the mouth of the Bruges canal taken from a German aeroplane. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; A01299)

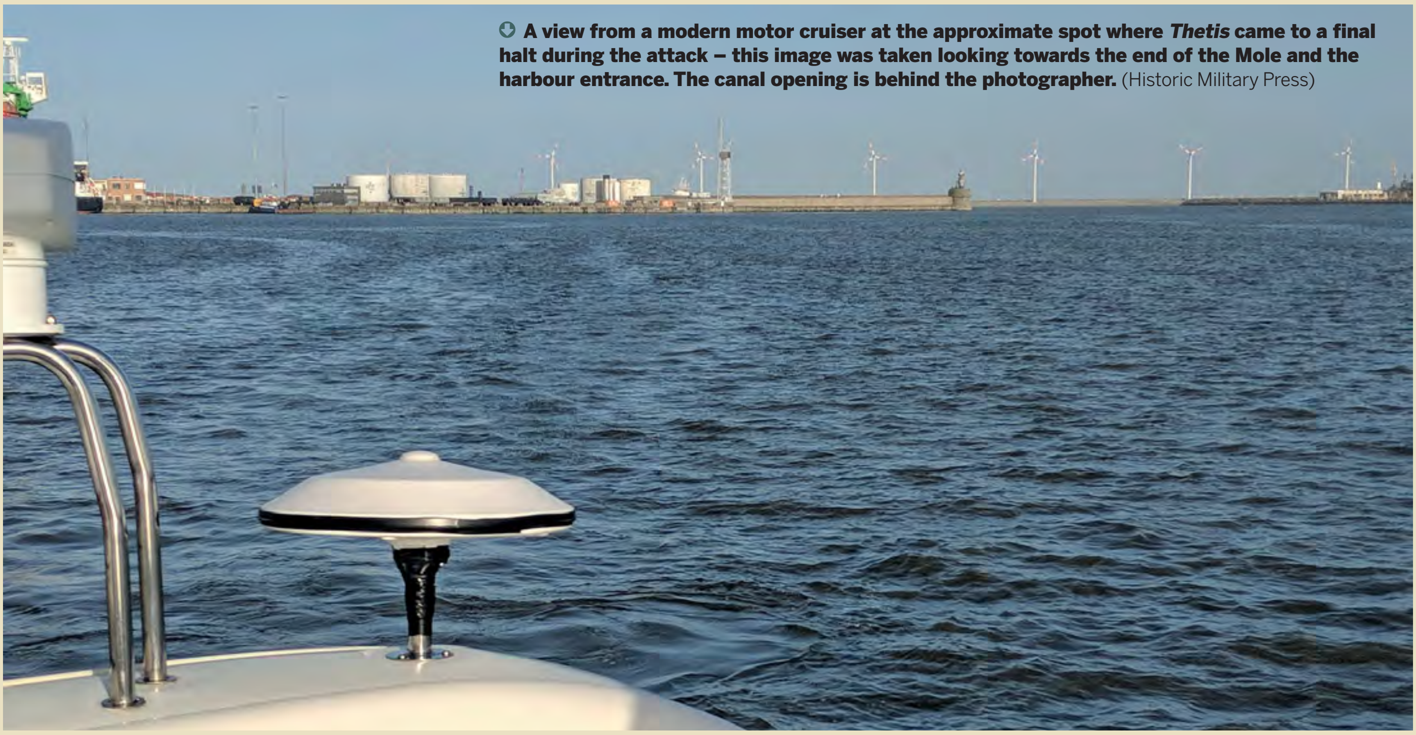
Iphigenia was steaming hard through the swept channel, when she was hit twice on the starboard side, with one of the shells severing a steam pipe and enveloping the fore part of the ship in steam. Nevertheless, Billyard-Leake pressed on:

'On approaching the canal entrance, it became enclosed with smoke, and I found I was heading for the western pier. I went full speed astern, and brought the ship in between a dredger and barge, severing the barge from the dredger … As soon as I was clear of the barge I went ahead on both engines, and sighted the *Intrepid* aground on the western bank, with a gap between her bows and the eastern bank. I endeavoured to close this gap, but collided with the port bow of *Intrepid* while turning.

'I then rang my alarm gong. Finding I was not completely blocking the channel, I ran down astern, which lead to the engine-room. As soon as I was clear, I sent Lieutenant Vaux to the engine room with an order to go ahead, which was promptly obeyed. The entire entrance was then covered in smoke. As soon as I considered the ship had headway, I went astern port, ahead starboard, helm hard-a-starboard and grounded on the eastern bank.' Like *Intrepid*, *Iphigenia* had come to a halt in the canal entrance. Now both ships had to be scuttled.

The wreck of HMS *Thetis* in the main channel in the harbour at Zeebrugge. (Paul Kendall Collection)





A view from a modern motor cruiser at the approximate spot where *Thetis* came to a final halt during the attack – this image was taken looking towards the end of the Mole and the harbour entrance. The canal opening is behind the photographer. (Historic Military Press)

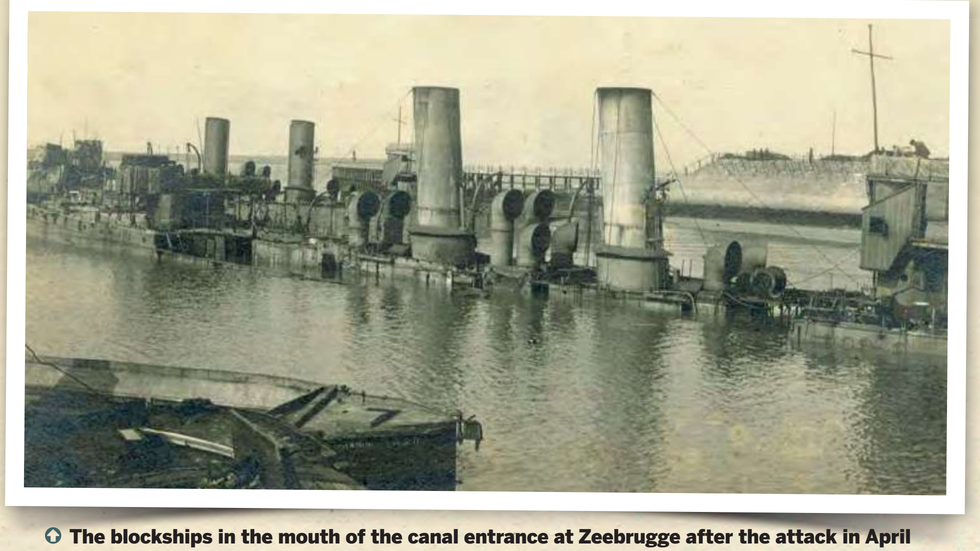
ABANDON SHIP

To Commander Sneyd, *Intrepid* appeared to be sinking already, due to the damage it had received, and he gave the order to abandon ship and for the scuttling charges to be set. But there was a problem: 'The foremost firing keys had not been brought to the firing position, the petty officer stationed for that purpose having been killed, and owing to our own smoke which was blowing along the ship and the fumes from a shell which burst under the break of the forecastle I was unable to find them. The charges were fired with the after firing keys and detonated satisfactorily, the ship sinking very quickly until her nettings were awash.'

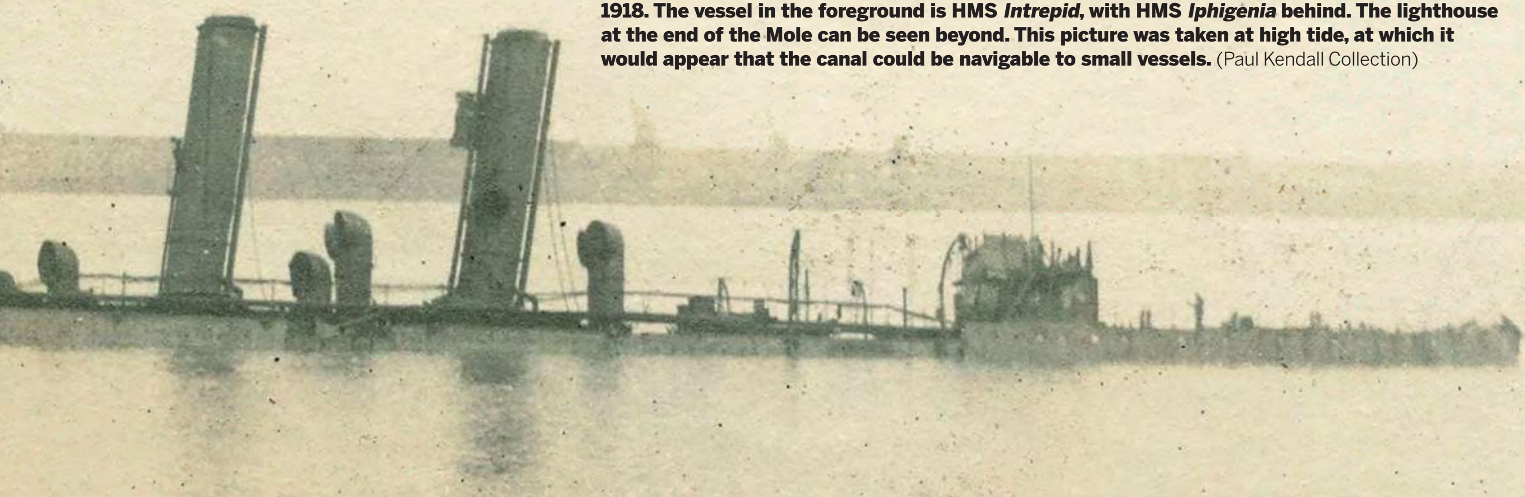
All the crew jumped into the ship's port cutter, the starboard one having been damaged by a German shell and sunk. Taking to the oars, the men pulled for all they were worth away from the cruiser. Even though the cutter was seriously overloaded and was holed in two or three places, it stayed afloat long enough to reach *ML 526* which was lying near the ship.

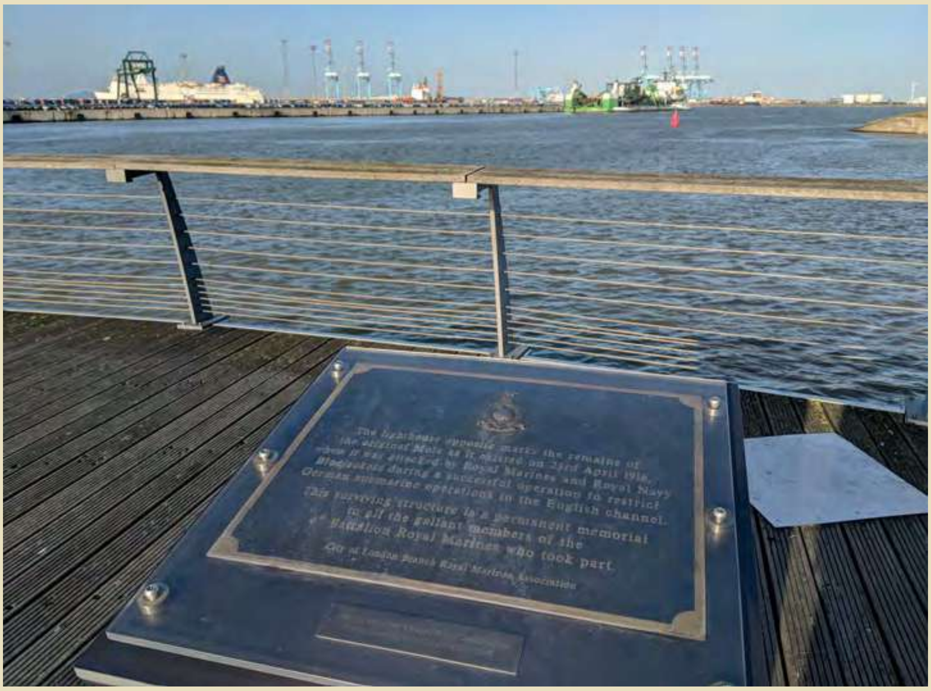
Billyard-Leake also issued the order for the blowing of the scuttling charges on *Iphigenia*, but to ensure that the cruiser was in exactly the correct position to block the canal, he wanted to still be able to manoeuvre the ship as it went down. Consequently, Engineer Mate Sidney West returned to the engine room to start the engines. Sid West remained in the engine room until he received the direct order from his skipper to join the rest of the crew on deck.

Satisfied that he had done all he could, Billyard-Leake ordered his men to also abandon ship into a cutter that was waiting to take them to the motor launch which was standing by. 'I then abandoned ship and fired my charges, which all exploded' he later reported. 'The ship's company left the ship in one cutter, as the other one was badly damaged. While in



The blockships in the mouth of the canal entrance at Zeebrugge after the attack in April 1918. The vessel in the foreground is HMS *Intrepid*, with HMS *Iphigenia* behind. The lighthouse at the end of the Mole can be seen beyond. This picture was taken at high tide, at which it would appear that the canal could be navigable to small vessels. (Paul Kendall Collection)




The lighthouse opposite marks the remains of
the original Mole as it existed on 23rd April 1918,
when it was attacked by Royal Marines and Royal Navy
Bluejackets during a successful operation to restrict
German submarine operations in the English channel.
This surviving structure is a permanent memorial
to all the gallant members of the
4th Battalion Royal Marines who took part
City of London Branch Royal Marines Association

This memorial to the men of the 4th Battalion Royal Marines is located on a viewing area off Paardenmarktstraat in Zeebrugge. Whilst the plaque points out the presence of the lighthouse at the end of the remains of the original Mole, the red buoy in the channel marks the approximate spot where HMS *Thetis* came to a final rest. *Intrepid* and *Iphigenia* were scuttled to the immediate left of the photographer. (Historic Military Press)

the cutter we came under more shrapnel and machine gun fire, which caused some casualties. While endeavouring to pull clear I sighted the bows of *ML No 282* across the stern of the ship and pulled up to her. The remainder in the cutter pulled round the stern, and the motor launch came up and picked them up. I was the last to leave the cutter, and to the best of my knowledge only three hands were left in her, one of which was killed.'

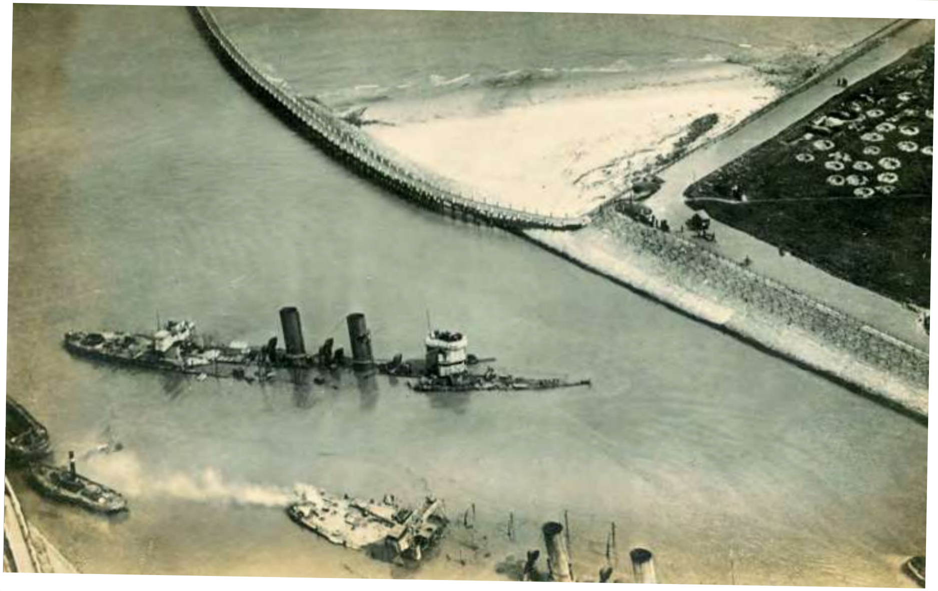
The evacuation of *Iphigenia* was not quite as smooth an operation as Billyard-Leake portrayed it, as revealed by Stoker 1st Class George: 'I left the *Iphigenia* and got into the boat I was detailed for: this went under and thirty of us scrambled for another boat which was all right. That went under, and we swam from there to a German drifter and hung on to her for a quarter of an hour. Then some of us were at the side of the pier, at Zeebrugge, and again hung on. Whilst I was there a rowing boat came along and I shouted for help and got taken off. It was a very warm business all the time, with plenty of stuff flying about in all directions.'

ESCAPE

Both *Intrepid* and *Iphigenia* had been sunk across the entrance of the canal, but the crews had the full length of the harbour, and the full fury of the German gunners, to negotiate before they were safe. *ML 282* picked up some survivors from *Intrepid* before moving upstream to try and help the crew of *Iphigenia*. As the motor launch closed in upon the blockship it was hit and began taking in water. Nevertheless, the skiff carrying the crew of *Iphigenia* appeared and they were swiftly transferred to the launch. The damaged *ML 282* was meant to accommodate fifty people, but now it contained 101 men and was attracting yet more fire from the shore. There was no room for all of the men from the blockship, some still being stuck in the cutter. So, Lieutenant Percy Dean, *ML 282*'s skipper, decided to attach the cutter to the stern of the launch and tow it to the ships waiting out at sea, through a devastating barrage of machine-gun and shell fire.

The blood-stained White Ensign that was wrapped around Sub-Lieutenant Maurice Lloyd during his evacuation from Zeebrugge. This moving reminder of the human cost of the St George's Day raid can be seen in Dover Museum. (Historic Military Press/Robert Mitchell)

Stoker Benjamin Eagleton of *Intrepid* could see German personnel on the Mole firing at the motor launch: 'As we got away we could see the Germans running about on the Mole with machine guns, and as they shot our fellows they got into the khaki, so that you couldn't tell one from the other. Of course, all the time they were firing from the land guns, and shells fell into the water everywhere: there were so many of them, that they made the sea like a volcano, and the water boiled all round, the shells being, many of them, filled with poison gas.



An aerial photograph of the blockships in the mouth of the canal entrance at Zeebrugge after the attack. The top vessel is HMS *Iphigenia*; the bottom HMS *Intrepid*. (Paul Kendall Collection)

The canal entrance at Zeebrugge as it is today pictured looking out into the harbour. *Iphigenia* and *Intrepid* were scuttled near the three wooden and concrete pillars can be seen in the water, with *Thetis* beyond. The cross (a fishermen's memorial) and viewing platform on the right can be accessed from Paardenmarktstraat. (Historic Military Press)

The work of salving the remains of the blockships still underway in 1925. Here recovered sections and pieces of scrap from the three vessels are pictured being unloaded from a barge at what appears to be the site of the fortified zone at the end of the Mole. (Historic Military Press)

'We stood by until the motor launches took the cutters in tow, but whilst ours was tugging us she got a salvo of 8-inch right through her, and went up in the air, so we had to row the cutter through the blaze of shells.'

The crew of *Thetis* had an equally difficult time escaping, as Commander Boddie later wrote: 'Of the original crew of 50, there were 10 killed, and 5 wounded, and the survivors packed themselves into the one remaining cutter. The Captain fired the charges, and then attempted to swarm down one of the falls, but was so weak from his wounds [he was wounded and gassed] that he just dropped into the sea, near where I was sitting in the cutter. In helping to drag him out of the water, I got the impression he would have preferred to have been left to drown. [Lieutenant] Lambert, in the stern of the cutter had missed this incident, and while the rest of us were itching to get away, had swarmed back on board to search for the Captain, which caused a little delay.

CH/2580(S) PRIVATE
FRANK ROLFE
ROYAL MARINE LIGHT INF.
23RD APRIL 1918
MY DEAR SON
TOILING DAYS ARE GONE
WE SHALL MEET AGAIN
ON HEAVEN'S ETERNAL SHORE
SUB LIEUTENANT
H.M.S. IPHIGENIA

The son of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Patterson Lloyd (late of The Buffs) and Mrs. Aileen Rosa Lloyd of Church Square, Rye, Sussex, Sub-Lieutenant Maurice Lloyd DSC and Bar, twice Mentioned in Despatches, was aged just twenty when he died. He was buried in Dover (St. James') Cemetery. (Historic Military Press)

'We shoved off from the ship, under a falling shower of soot and ash blown up by the exploding charges, in drifting clouds of smoke, with much desultory firing going on everywhere, and an occasional machine gun bullet hitting the cutter. We rowed down channel towards the exit from the harbour. Our ML had disappeared, but after rowing for from 5 to 10 minutes, and clearing the harbour entrance, we came across another, and boarded her, to find half the crew of *Intrepid* on board, and taking up most of the space in the ML [*526*]. The *Intrepid* had no wounded and we put our 5 in the wardroom, where we dressed and bandaged them during the night.'

AT SEA, AT LAST

Waiting for news of the raid beyond Zeebrugge was Commander Campbell of HMS *Warwick*: 'At about 1.35 am … four MLs were sighted, one of these informed us that the *Vindictive* and boarding steamers had left the Mole, she also reported having about 100 survivors from the blockships on board, many of whom were wounded. We accordingly stopped, ordered the ML alongside and transferred the wounded.'

Keyes was watching *ML 282* as she came alongside *Warwick*, hearing for the first time that *Intrepid* and *Iphigenia* had sunk their vessels across the canal entrance. The greatest raid of the First World War had been, it seemed, a success.

But mixed with the feeling of jubilation there was a sense of deep sorrow. One particular incident encapsulated both sensations. Sub-Lieutenant Maurice Lloyd was among the wounded who were transferred from *ML 282* to *Warwick*. Keyes recalled that Lloyd 'had begged for a place in one of the blockships after I had completed all the appointments'. The story is that when a Lieutenant Franks was forced to withdraw from the operation due to appendicitis, Billyard-Leake appointed Sub-Lieutenant Lloyd as his replacement aboard *Iphigenia*.

Keyes now saw Lloyd lying badly wounded on the deck of HMS *Warwick*. 'Lloyd had the *Iphigenia*'s White Ensign wrapped round his waist,' Keyes later wrote, 'and it was saturated with his blood. I think he knew that his number was up, but was perfectly happy and fearfully proud of having been able to bring away the Ensign, which I told him he should keep.'

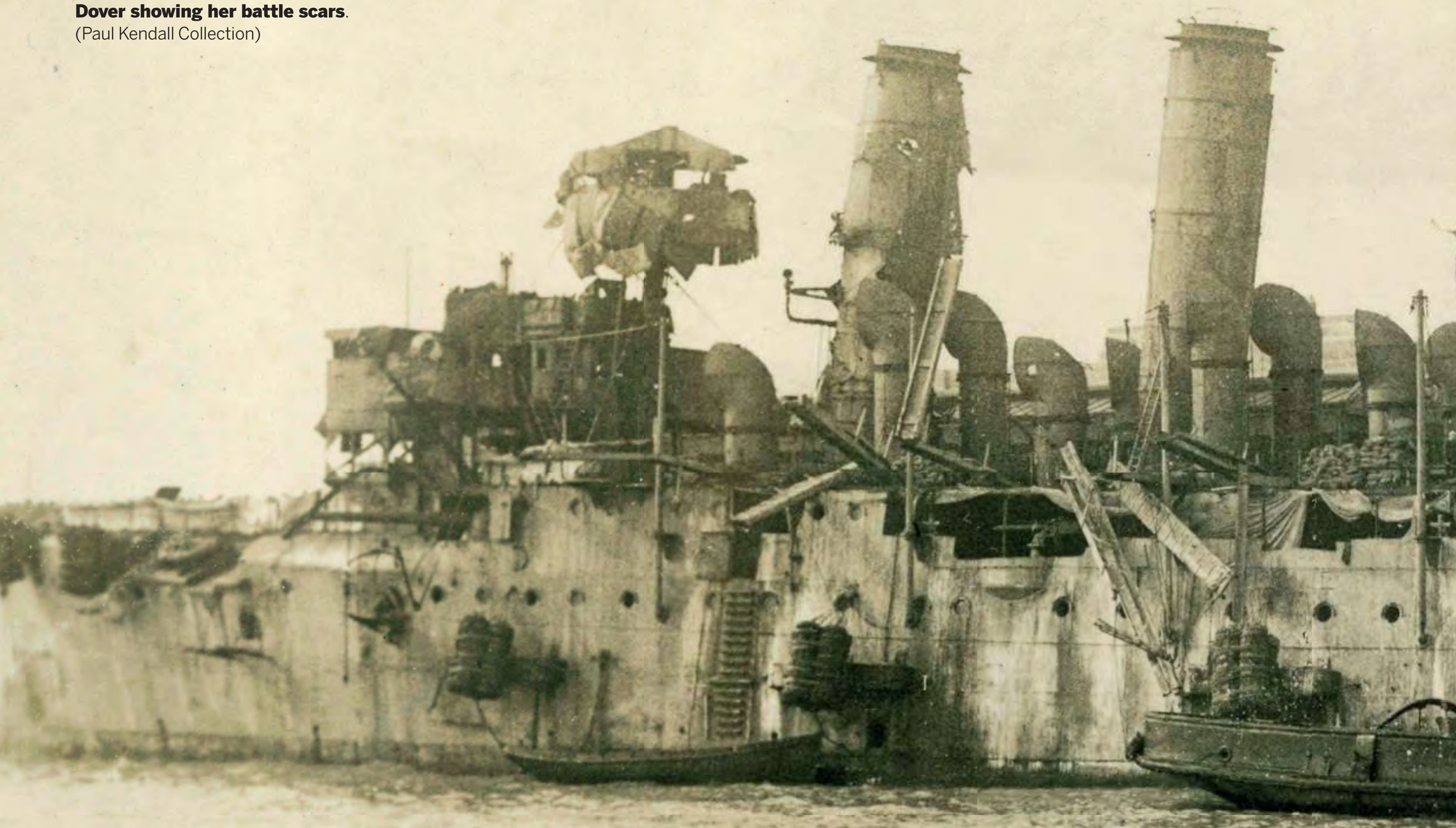
Lloyd, who was transferred to the hospital ship *Liberty* on arrival at Dover, clung onto the Ensign, but could only cling on to life for a further twenty-four hours. That flag now proudly resides in Dover Museum. ◉

Our Task Done

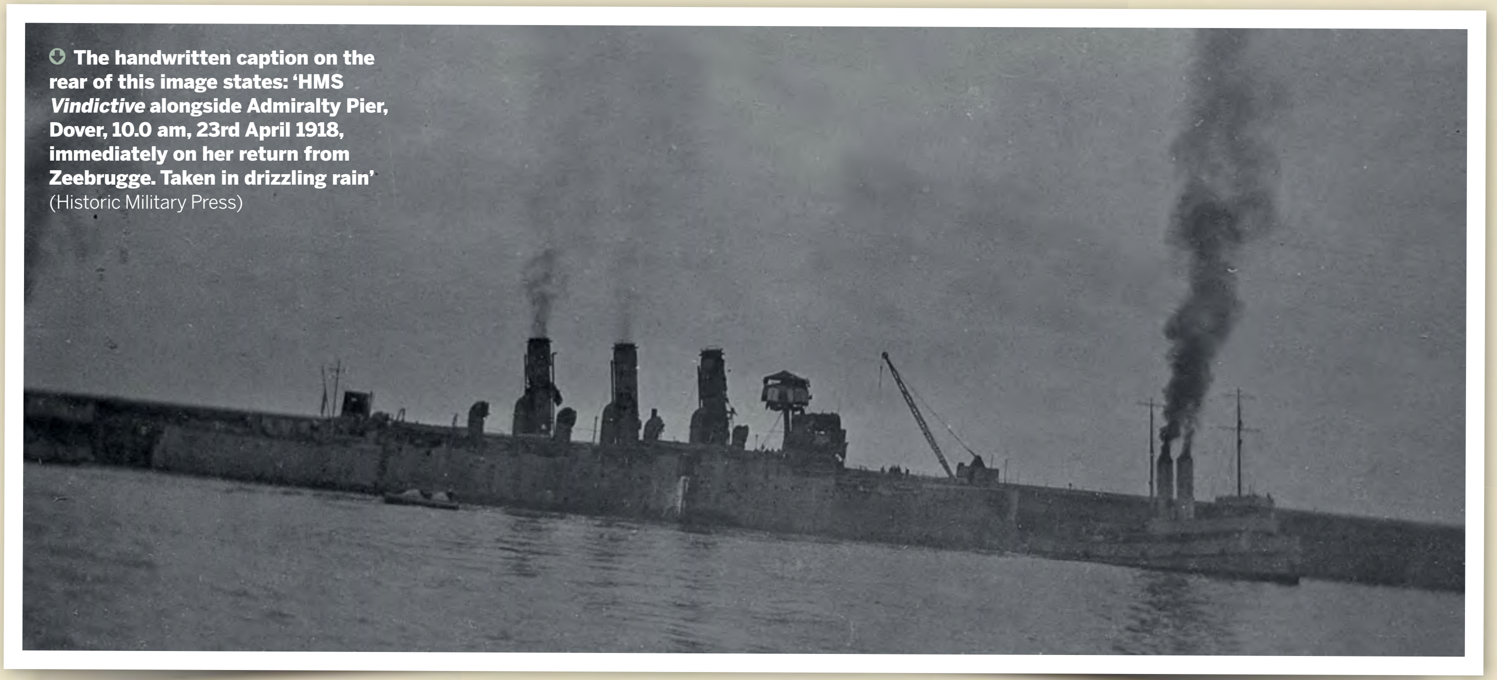
The blockships had been sunk across the entrance to the Bruges Canal, and much damage had been done to the port and its facilities. It was time to withdraw. But every German soldier and sailor was at his post and determined not to let a single one of the raiders escape.

The men had done their duty, and beyond. It was now Captain Carpenter's decision when to sound the signal for the landing parties to return to their ships. 'At about 00.50 the situation was as follows,' Carpenter wrote in his report. 'I had seen the submarine explosion in the direction of the viaduct, and observed the blockships proceeding shorewards from the Mole. *Iris* had arrived alongside the Mole, originally about 100 yards ahead of *Vindictive* and had clearly been unable to secure in position owing to the swell and backwash. She had then left the Mole and secured alongside *Vindictive* abaft *Daffodil*.

'The main object of storming the Mole had been accomplished. The only reason for remaining alongside any longer was that of continuing the work of demolition which had been commenced by a party of seamen under the extremely able leadership of Lieutenant Dickinson, RN. Such a reason seemed to me to be insufficient to warrant waiting alongside until the latest moment allowed by the Operation Orders for the retirement to commence *viz* 01.20, observing that the only guns in *Vindictive* which could have borne directly on the Mole had been put out of action; secondly, that the upper works and upper deck were being hit many times per minute with an increasing number of casualties to those in exposed position; and thirdly, owing to the failure of the Mole anchors, no member of the storming parties could hope to return if *Daffodil* became disabled. That the latter vessel escaped destruction was little short of a miracle. I therefore ordered the pre-arranged signal to be made for the retirement to commence.'



HMS *Vindictive* alongside at Dover showing her battle scars. (Paul Kendall Collection)

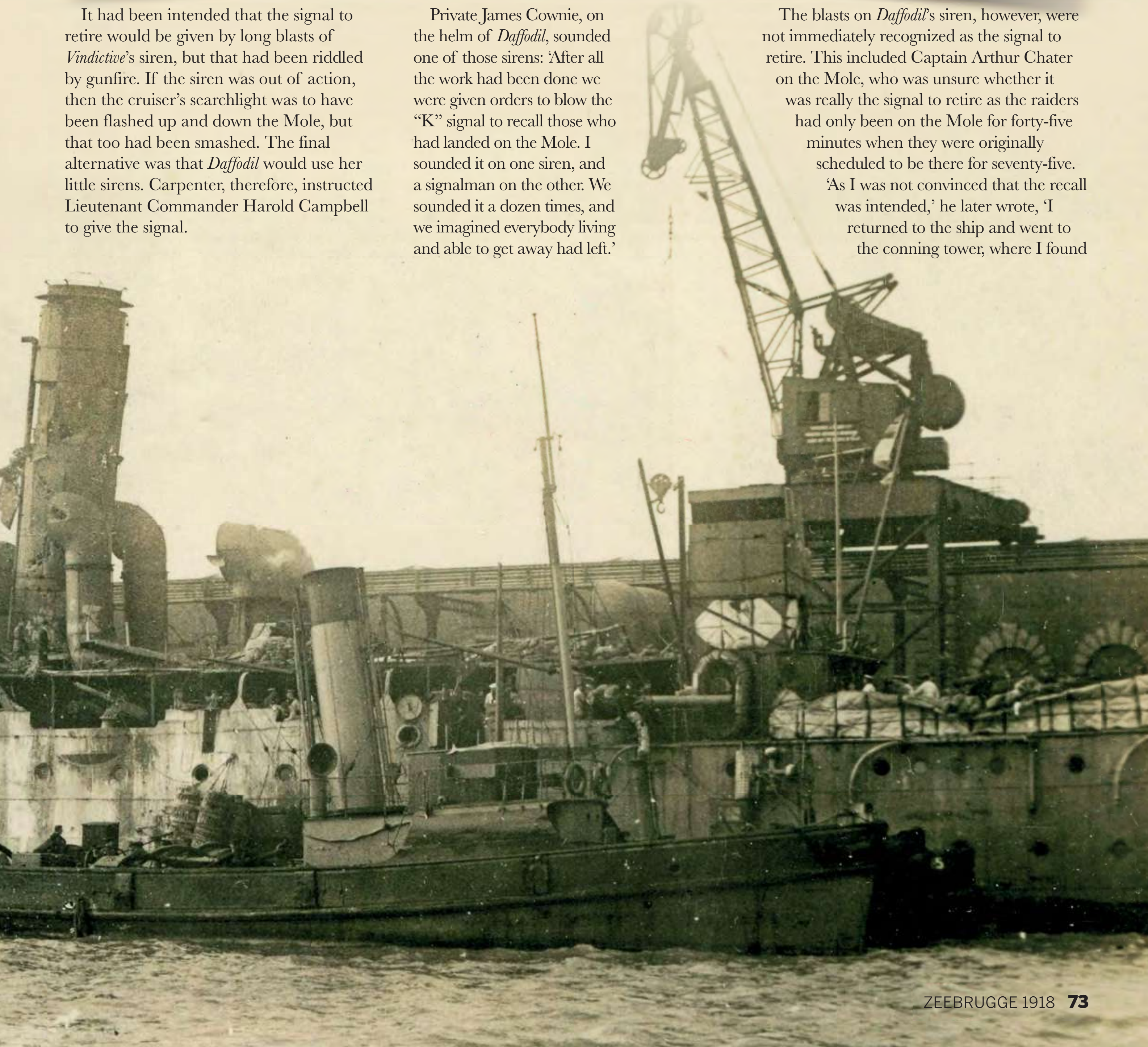


The handwritten caption on the rear of this image states: 'HMS *Vindictive* alongside Admiralty Pier, Dover, 10.0 am, 23rd April 1918, immediately on her return from Zeebrugge. Taken in drizzling rain' (Historic Military Press)

It had been intended that the signal to retire would be given by long blasts of *Vindictive*'s siren, but that had been riddled by gunfire. If the siren was out of action, then the cruiser's searchlight was to have been flashed up and down the Mole, but that too had been smashed. The final alternative was that *Daffodil* would use her little sirens. Carpenter, therefore, instructed Lieutenant Commander Harold Campbell to give the signal.

Private James Cownie, on the helm of *Daffodil*, sounded one of those sirens: 'After all the work had been done we were given orders to blow the "K" signal to recall those who had landed on the Mole. I sounded it on one siren, and a signalman on the other. We sounded it a dozen times, and we imagined everybody living and able to get away had left.'

The blasts on *Daffodil*'s siren, however, were not immediately recognized as the signal to retire. This included Captain Arthur Chater on the Mole, who was unsure whether it was really the signal to retire as the raiders had only been on the Mole for forty-five minutes when they were originally scheduled to be there for seventy-five. 'As I was not convinced that the recall was intended,' he later wrote, 'I returned to the ship and went to the conning tower, where I found



Captain Alfred Carpenter VC, RN, on the right, and a fellow officer with mascots from HMS *Vindictive* after the attack. (HMP)

Captain Carpenter, and asked him if we were to withdraw. Having been told that the recall was ordered, I returned to the sea wall and passed the order to all those whom I could reach by voice or signal.'

Private Philip Hodgson was also confused by the sound of the signal to retire: 'We had been told that the signal for us to withdraw from the Mole would be short whoops from *Vindictive*'s siren and had been given demonstrations, but there on the Mole, how were we to know that *Vindictive*'s siren had been rendered useless when the foremost funnel had been struck. So *Daffodil*'s Merseyside buzzer had been used to replace the siren but we took no notice of it and after some minutes it was sounded again and then someone came along to the edge of the parapet pathway and called us back and there was a general stampede up the ladders and a leap on to the wall.'

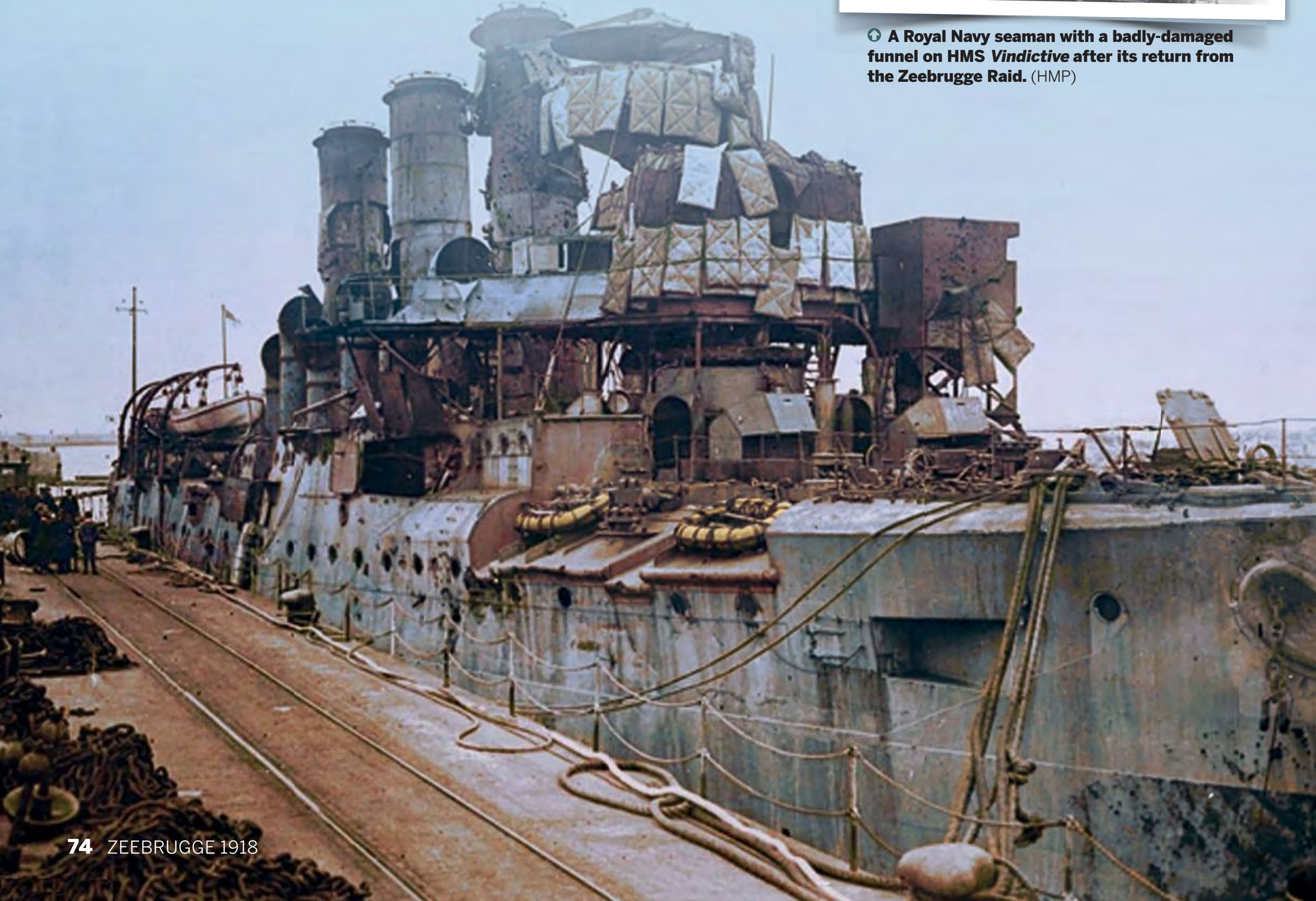
DISENGAGING

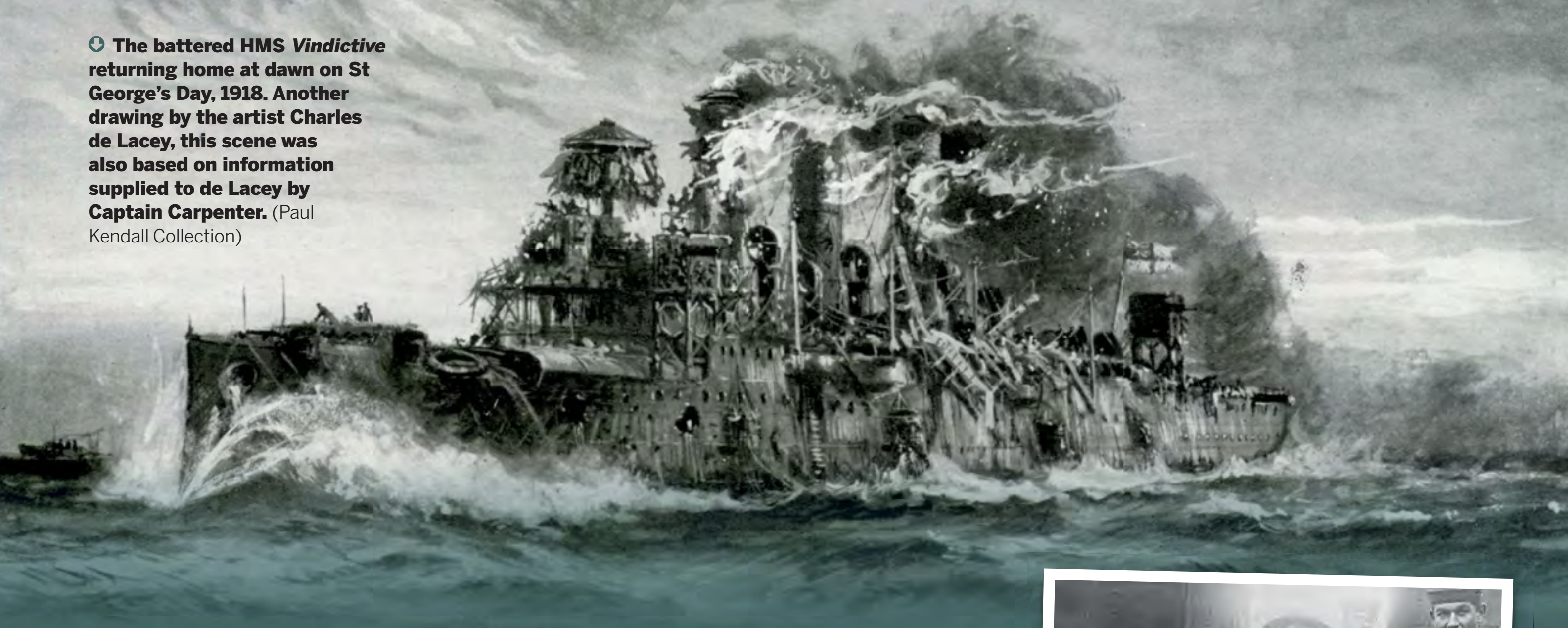
One of the most difficult and dangerous manoeuvres in warfare is to disengage from the enemy whilst under heavy fire, as Private Jim Clist, amongst many others, experienced: 'At times it was as light as day with search lights, Very lights and star shells showing up all parts of the Mole. Before the landing we were told that the recall signal would be when the searchlights played up and down the Mole, but apparently the searchlights were all out of action. The ship's siren was sounded and Major Weller told me to tell the men to retire back to the ship. I was on the raised part of the Mole and at different places I stopped and shouted to the men who were about sixteen feet below me. They had to climb rope ladders. They had their bayonets fixed and the man above often got his backside jabbed with the bayonet of the man below.'

Likewise, Private James Feeney remembered the difficulties he encountered as he struggled to get back aboard *Vindictive*: 'When I climbed over the railings at the top I nearly fell back, as my rifle was slipping off my shoulder. The gangways were heaving up and down now, and the hail of shell was awful. Then for the first time it occurred to me that I might get hurt if I hung around much longer, so I was getting careful at last. I made a jump at the gangway, and got over, and threw my rifle in. I scrambled down as best I could, picked up my rifle, and went over to the starboard side.'

A Royal Navy seaman with a badly-damaged funnel on HMS *Vindictive* after its return from the Zeebrugge Raid. (HMP)

HMS *Vindictive* berthed at Dover following her return from Zeebrugge. For the operation her main armament had been removed and splinter protection added around her superstructure. A special 'fighting top' had been constructed on her mainmast, seen here above the bridge and surrounded by protective matting, and it was from there that *Vindictive* was able to provide machine-gun covering fire for the few minutes required for the landing party to attack the Mole. (Historic Military Press; Colourised by Richard Molloy)





The battered HMS *Vindictive* returning home at dawn on St George's Day, 1918. Another drawing by the artist Charles de Lacey, this scene was also based on information supplied to de Lacey by Captain Carpenter. (Paul Kendall Collection)

Air Mechanic Roland Entwisle nearly lost his life as he tried to get back on the ship. A piece of shrapnel hit him on the back of his steel helmet and he fell forward, being crushed between the Mole and one of the brows. Luckily, he was spotted by a sailor and dragged back onboard.

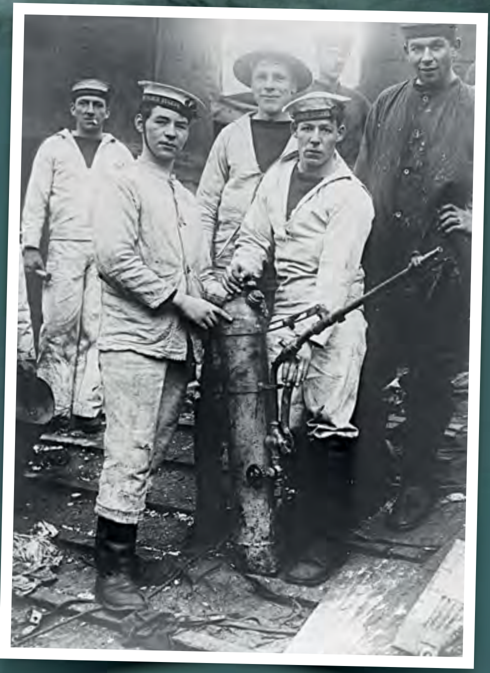
Able Seaman Cyril Widdison recalled the moment when he heard *Daffodil*'s signal: 'The masonry of the Mole was ploughed by our shells and all the time a fierce fire was concentrated on our ship, which represented our only hope of a safe return. Just after one o'clock the retreat was sounded, and those of us who were there ran breathlessly back – ran for our lives amid a hail of shot and shell. Of 14 or 15 landing ladders only two remained and they creaked and bent ominously as 300 or 400 of us scrambled aboard. Some of us were helping the wounded comrades along: whilst other fellows had to be carried aboard. I found one poor lad lying helplessly on the shore, only a few yards from the gangway, and with a pal's assistance I managed to get him safely on board. The scene both on deck and below was too awful to describe.'

Captain Chater observed how the men struggled to get back to the ships: 'The enemy were still shelling the sea wall, and those who had to cross the Mole and climb the ladders had the most hazardous time. Fortunately, some of the ladders remained intact until the end. When I could see no more men approaching, I returned on board and reported to that effect. A few moments later the ship left the Mole.'

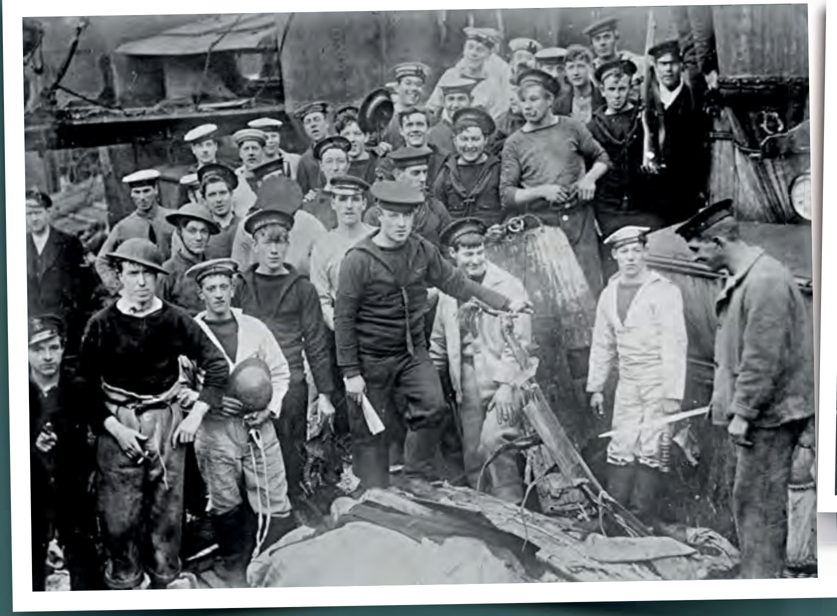
THE PASSAGE HOME

At 01.05 hours, Carpenter was informed that there were no more men left on the Mole. But just in case anyone was still making their way to the ships, *Vindictive*'s skipper waited another five minutes. Then he instructed *Daffodil* to tow *Vindictive*'s bows away from the Mole.

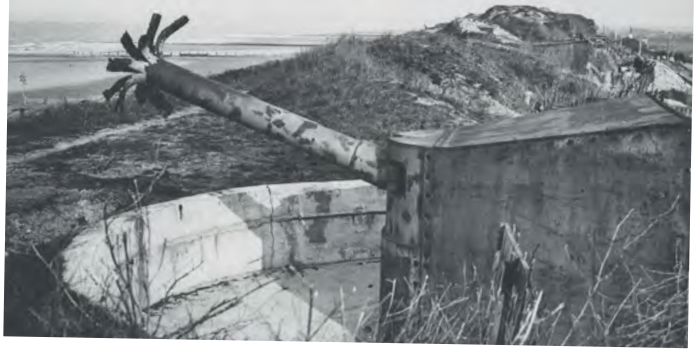
Lieutenant Edward Hilton wrote of those last moments as *Vindictive* pulled away. 'For good or ill, our part was done. The blockships were either past or sunk, we did not know which, and if we were to get away at all we must go now, or we should not be out of range of the enemy's big guns before dawn. The *Daffodil* gave a snort,



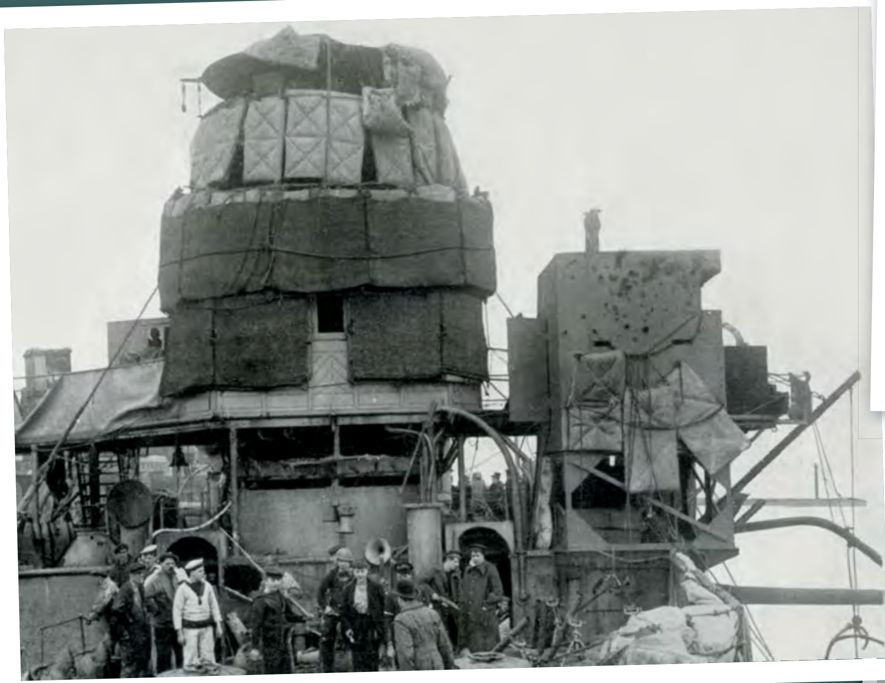
Members of the crew of HMS *Prince Eugene* cleaning the upper deck of HMS *Vindictive* after her return to Dover following the Zeebrugge Raid. One sailor holds a flamethrower of the type used on the Mole by members of the Royal Naval Air Service Experimental Party in support of the Royal Marine and naval landing parties. (HMP)



One of the German shore batteries that defended the coast near Zeebrugge. This 150mm gun of the Kaiserin Battery, east of *Blankenberge*, was actually destroyed by the Germans themselves on 24 October 1918. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; H09446)



Royal Navy personnel on HMS *Vindictive*, with weapons and other debris, after her return from the Zeebrugge Raid. (NARA)



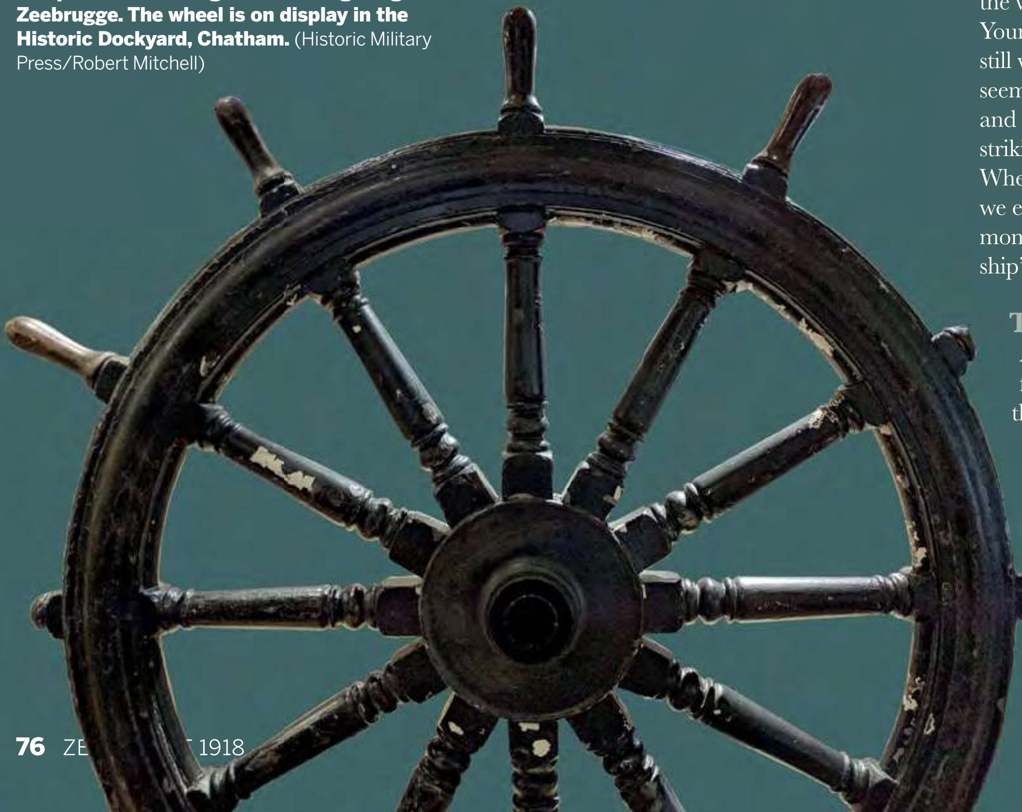
A picture showing *Vindictive*'s bridge and armoured flamethrower hut, the latter being on the right. The fighting top is above the bridge, with the conning tower between the two. A large shell passed through the hole to the right of the seaman in the white uniform. Note the mattresses used to protect exposed parts of the ship's superstructure from incoming fire, shrapnel and shell splinters. (Paul Kendall Collection)

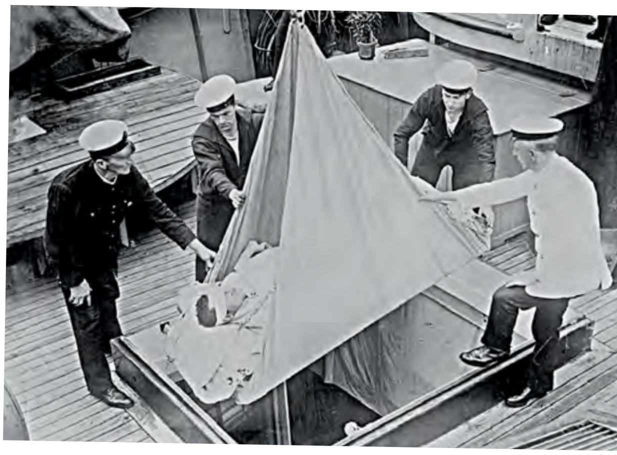
expressive of relief at being released from her long, hard shove, and of satisfaction at its complete success, and backed away, giving our bow a pull out as she did so. Helped by the set of the tide, our bow began to swing away from the Mole, and in a minute we were clear, and our propellers were throbbing.'

The ships had to move quickly out of range of the German guns, and on *Vindictive* frantic efforts were made to make smoke to hide her from the enemy artillery. Clouds of smoke poured aft as the cruiser pulled away as fast as she could be manoeuvered, and, amazingly, not a single German shell found its mark, with one great salvo from the Mole battery landing in the sea at exactly the spot where *Vindictive* had been just a few moments earlier.

Clearing the Mole, Carpenter had to set course for the rendezvous with HMS *Warwick*, only to find that all bar one compass had been destroyed and the starboard telegraph was broken. Communication with the engine room was still intact, however, and Carpenter ordered 'Full Ahead'.

A ship's wheel from HMS *Vindictive*, complete with damage from the fighting at Zeebrugge. The wheel is on display in the Historic Dockyard, Chatham. (Historic Military Press/Robert Mitchell)





Two views of wounded personnel being transferred to HMHS *Liberty*, one in a cot, following the St George's Day attack. A steamship built in 1908, *Liberty* served as a hospital ship throughout the First World War. She was broken up 1937. (NARA)

HMS *Vindictive* was still well within range of the Mole battery, and at every minute, the men onboard expected to be blasted out of the water. 'We stole in deep silence. The din in firing had wholly ceased; and all but the guns' crew were below, the decks were empty, and there was nothing to hear now but the wash of the waves alongside,' remembered Lieutenant Young who, though wounded in the arm, was still with the forecastle's 6-inch gun. 'The ship seemed to be waiting with her guns ready and her attention strained for the crash of a striking shell. But the minutes were passing. When was it going to begin … Each moment we expected the crash and the flame; but the moment passed, and still the silence of the ship's progress was unbroken.'

THE DEAD AND DYING

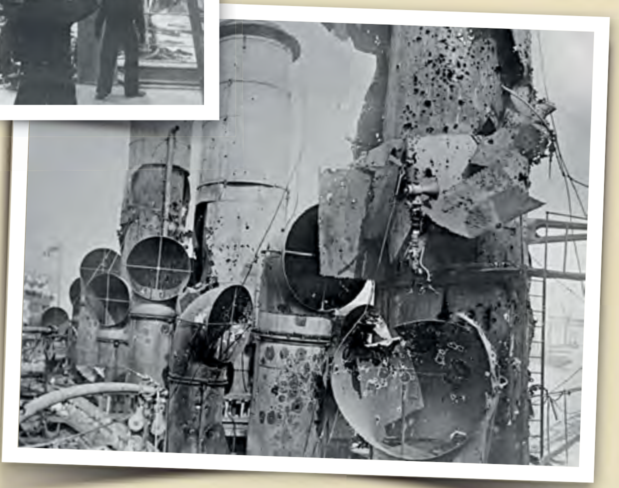
As *Daffodil* began to tow *Vindictive* away from the Mole a shrapnel splinter severed the rope. *Vindictive* pulled hard on her helm and managed to swing clear and turn for home. The former Mersey ferry then had to run the gauntlet of enemy fire. Harry Adam saw just what *Daffodil* was about to endure: 'Every gun the Germans could muster was setting up a murderous barrage through which we had to pass – huge mountains of water spurted up everywhere.'

Lieutenant Campbell, though he had been struck in his eye, refused to leave the bridge until *Daffodil* was well away from the Mole. With blood streaming over his face he was at last led below.

Like *Vindictive*, *Daffodil* made smoke which trailed astern and helped conceal her from the German gunners. *Daffodil* needed every inch of speed that could be squeezed out of her engines to escape the shellfire and so Bernard Devlin went below to see what help he could give: 'The stokers were absolutely worn out, and when I got below I quickly discovered that our services were needed. Water had also to be pumped out of the hold, which had been flooded in order to extinguish the fire which had previously broken out amidships. When about three quarters of a mile from the Mole the old *Daffodil* had a bad time. Shells poured upon our decks, but the *Daffodil* under her own steam still ploughed her way through the water. On deck brave lads lay dead and dying, and men writhed about in pain.'

A binnacle from HMS *Vindictive* which can be seen in the Historic Dockyard at Chatham. (Historic Military Press/Robert Mitchell)

Sailors aboard HMS *Daffodil IV* or HMS *Iris II*, at Dover, after their return across the Channel. (Paul Kendall Collection)



Extensive damage was caused to the funnels of HMS *Vindictive* whilst she was alongside the Mole at Zeebrugge. (US Library of Congress)

IRIS ALONE

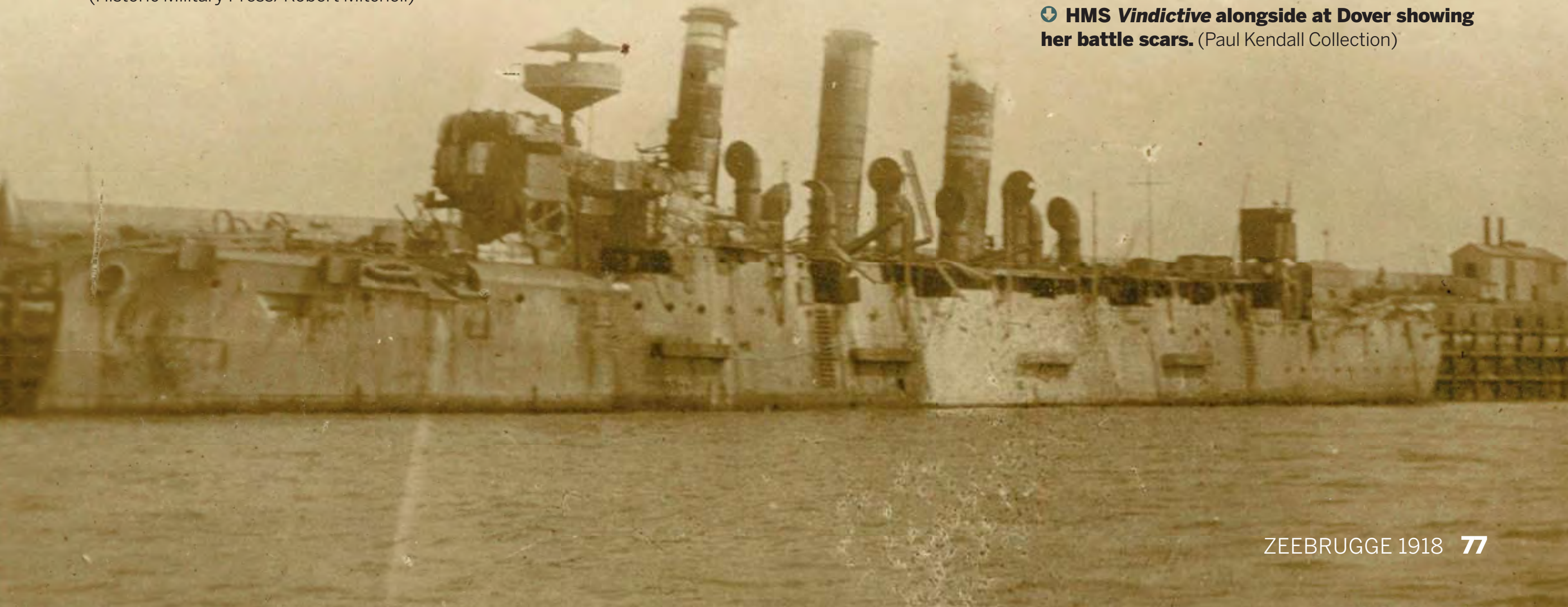
As with her sister ship, *Iris* had also been sheltered to a large degree from the German guns by the Mole, but as she pulled away ahead of *Vindictive* the ferry came under heavy fire from both the battery on the Mole and from the shore.

'The first large shot came through the port control system, and carried away the port side of the bridge, and caused a very serious fire among the ammunition and bombs under bridge,' reported Lieutenant Oscar Henderson. 'It mortally wounded Commander Gibbs and seriously wounded the navigating officer, Lieutenant Spencer RNR. The upper deck had been cleared previous to this, so I brought up a volunteer party with fire hose to quench the bridge fire. Noticing the condition of the bridge I rushed up there, and finding Commander Gibbs as I then thought, dead, I assumed command.' Gibbs had lost both his legs and, though still alive at that point, died shortly afterwards.

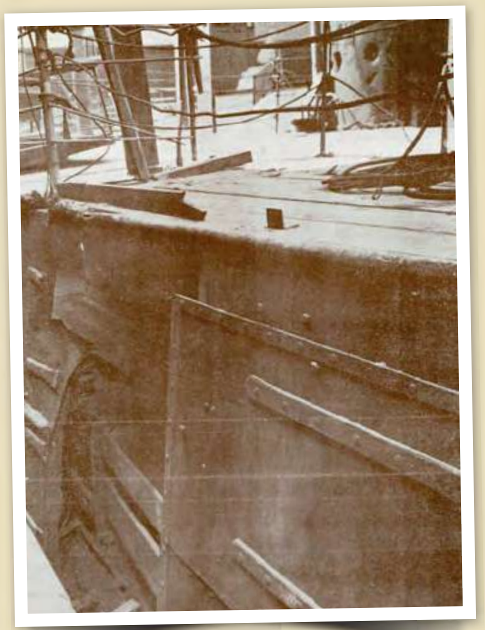
Iris continued to be pounded by the German guns. '[The] ship was then hit by three shells simultaneously on the main deck, and as the men were packed very closely the casualties were frightful,' continued Henderson. 'While ship was steady on her course we succeeded in putting out the fire and also commenced to make smoke, and due to this and the gallantry of a motor boat making smoke close to us we succeeded in getting clear. Ship was so badly damaged that communications and steering from fore bridge was very difficult.'

Iris escaped into the dark. Petty Officer O'Hara said that he had to strike a light to see on deck. 'and a terrible sight met our eyes; amidships men were piled 5 and 6 deep dead on top of the wounded and dying.' Few of the men on the starboard side of the ferry had survived the shellfire.

'We were entirely on our own at sea at the mercy of any enemy craft and partly disabled, there appeared to be no officers around except the naval Lieut., who was navigating the ship,' recalled George Calverley. 'Dawn came slowly along, and we were able to look around for the bodies on the deck … Wounded were expiring every minute in spite of the little we had been able to do for them and … our next task was to sort out the dead and then bring those up from below to add to them.' The only medic dealing with the wounded was Captain Frank Pocock as all his staff had been killed.



HMS *Vindictive* alongside at Dover showing her battle scars. (Paul Kendall Collection)



Some of the damage to HMS *Iris II* caused during the Zeebrugge Raid. The original caption states: 'Large hole, ship's side, caused by heavy shell.' (Paul Kendall Collection)

DOVER AT LAST

HMS *Vindictive* reached Dover on the morning of the 23rd, ahead of *Daffodil* and, finally, the badly-damaged *Iris*. A fleet of lorries was used to take the dead to the mortuary, the wounded to hospital. The motor launches followed, with ML 282 reaching Dover at around 11.30 hours, and ML 286 being the last to arrive.

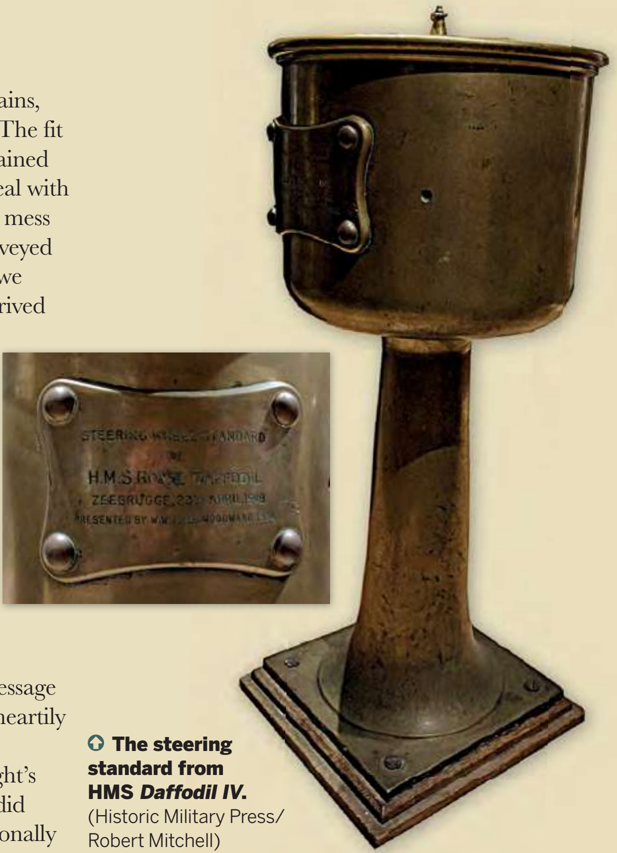
Amongst the Marines who returned to Dover was Lance Corporal George Calverley: 'We slowly steamed in towards the quay. As we approached I saw a long lean figure watching us; it was Cdr. Ralph Sneyd, Captain of one of the Blockships with a blood-stained bandage round his head. It was good to see he had survived. We closed on the quay, and as we were doing so a squad of sailors arrived from the Dover Patrol.

'Waiting by the quayside were two trains, one of which was an ambulance train. The fit men immediately left the ship and entrained in another train leaving the sailors to deal with what can only be described as a bloody mess we left behind. The wounded were conveyed to the Chatham Naval Hospital, while we were taken to Deal station where we arrived about 4 pm. There were four lorries waiting to take us to barracks, but we only needed two.' The sailors who had returned from Zeebrugge spent the following night in Dover.

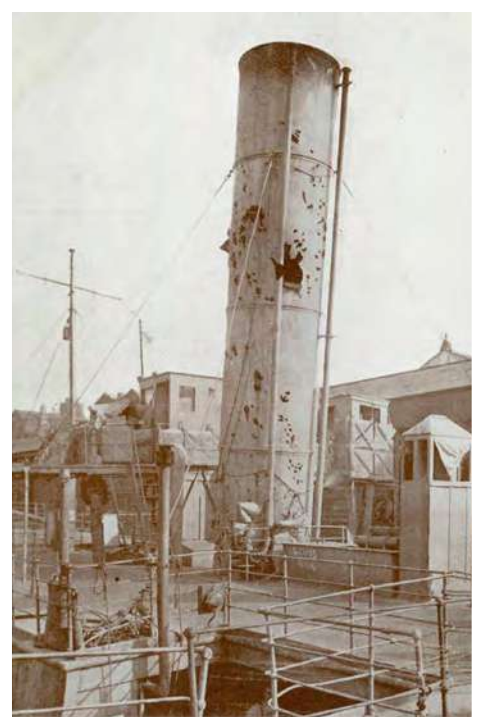
Many of the Royal Navy officers were invited to dinner at Keyes' HQ on Dover's Marine Parade. Some of those officers were wounded and had refused the opportunity to go to hospital, preferring instead to spend the evening with their comrades.

During the meal Keyes read out a message that had been sent by the King: 'Most heartily congratulate you and the forces under your command who carried out last night's operation with such success. The splendid gallantry displayed by all under exceptionally hazardous circumstances fills me with pride and admiration.'

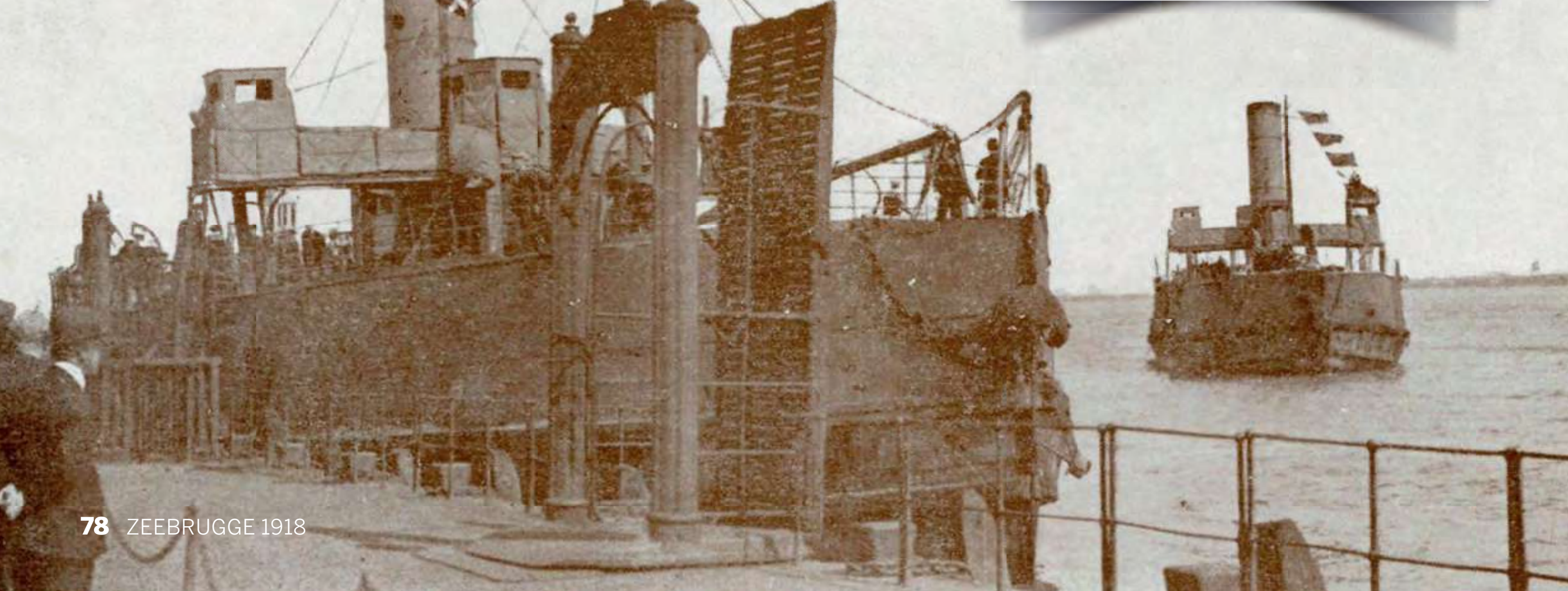
Keyes recalled that night with mixed feelings. 'We knew that two blockships had been sunk in the position, in which (according to the best expert opinion), they would certainly block one exit of the Bruges canal system, and as far as Zeebrugge was concerned, we felt that we had done our task and nothing else mattered. But we had all lost good friends and comrades and my thoughts turned to those gallant souls, who had so ardently welcomed the opportunity of doing something, which would add honour and merit to that which our Service had gained in the past.' ◉



The steering standard from HMS *Daffodil IV*. (Historic Military Press/ Robert Mitchell)



A view of HMS *Iris II* taken after her return to New Brighton in April 1918, showing the battle damage to her funnel. Note the smoke-apparatus on the deck. (Paul Kendall Collection)



The former Mersey ferries HMS *Daffoldil IV* and HMS *Iris II* pictured arriving back at New Brighton after their participation in the Zeebrugge Raid. (Paul Kendall Collection)

The RAF at Zeebrugge and Ostend

Though rarely mentioned, the RAF made a significant contribution to both raids, particularly the second attack upon Ostend.

As Admiral Keyes had commented, the Royal Air Force, and before it the Royal Naval Air Service, played a key role in the raid. Long before the operation, the RNAS had been providing Keyes with vital information about the defences at Zeebrugge and Ostend. The D.H.4 aircraft of No.202 Squadron had, over a period of weeks, photographed and re-photographed the area to be assaulted and it was these images that enabled the mock-up of the Mole, that had been constructed near Deal for the training of the Marines, to be highly accurate. As the attack was to be delivered both at night and under a smoke-screen, and the raiders had to know the ground and structures extremely well, such accuracy was essential. These sorties also provided photographs of the approach channels and buoys for the Royal Navy.

The assault flotilla, as we have seen, had to steam through many hours of daylight during which time there was a high chance of the ships being spotted by either enemy submarines, surface vessels or aircraft. Very careful arrangements were therefore made to screen the assembly and early movements of the ships and to keep the Germans fully occupied and distracted. These arrangements included aeroplane, seaplane, and airship patrols, as well as seaward patrols by surface craft, all of which were directed against possible enemy submarines and air offensive patrols, over the fleet by aircraft from Dover, and over the Belgian coastal area by Sopwith Camels from the airfield at Dunkirk. Low-level bombing attacks on the German aeroplane and seaplane bases at Zeebrugge were also ordered, as well as other targets in the area, including coastal batteries.

These attacks were to begin two-and-a-half hours before Zero Hour, and were to continue, with increasing intensity, until the blockships, with their supporting vessels, reached the objectives. It was hoped that the bombing attacks would force the crews of the German batteries to seek shelter in their dug-outs, and so leave the guns more or less

An example of the Handley Page Type O heavy bomber, a number of which undertook missions in support of the Zeebrugge and Ostend raids. (The Key Collection)

Two pictures of German seaplanes from the naval base at Zeebrugge airborne during the First World War. (Paul Kendall Collection)

unattended at the time when the expedition reached the coast, and it was also hoped that the searchlights would be diverted to the aeroplanes, away from the approaching fleet.

During the final period of the approach journey, the aircraft were to drop a large number of incendiary bombs in order to cause fires which would illuminate the area, and immediately before the time of arrival of the ships the pilots were to release parachute flares for the same reason.

THEN CAME THE RAIN

Such, then were the plans for the Zeebrugge Raid. When the assault flotilla headed towards the Belgian coast on 11 April, at 22.40 hours the first of the Handley Page bombers of 215 Squadron left their aerodrome, in bad weather, for Zeebrugge. For an hour, the aircraft bombed the target, with the bomber of Captain J.R. Allen being hit and crashing into the sea seven miles off Ostend.

About the time that Allen's 'plane crashed, the weather had deteriorated to such an extent that, as we have already seen, the naval assault was called off. The remaining aircraft duly returned to their base.

After the second postponement on 12 April, the military situation on the ground in Belgium changed dramatically. The Germans broke through the line on the Lys as they continued with their Spring Offensive, and they pressed hard towards the Channel ports. The evacuation of certain northern bases and depots became an urgent matter. It was suggested to the recently-created Air Ministry that, as a precautionary measure, it would be wise to move the air units in the Dunkirk area away from the front. This advice was accepted and the personnel and aircraft of two Handley Page squadrons, Nos. 207 and 215, were sent to England, with the aeroplanes of the squadrons being allotted partly to 214 Squadron, which remained in the area, and also to 216 Squadron, which was part of the force stationed in the neighbourhood of Nancy for bombing attacks on German industrial and military targets. The result was that when the naval attack was made on 22/23 April there was a much-reduced bomber force available to support it.

During the afternoon of the 22nd, when the assaulting fleet, escorted by aircraft, had set out once more for Zeebrugge and Ostend, the weather was clear. By the evening. however, the sky had clouded over and a drizzle had set in, but the strength and direction of the wind were favourable for the laying of smoke-screens and Vice-Admiral Keyes made a signal that the attack would take place.

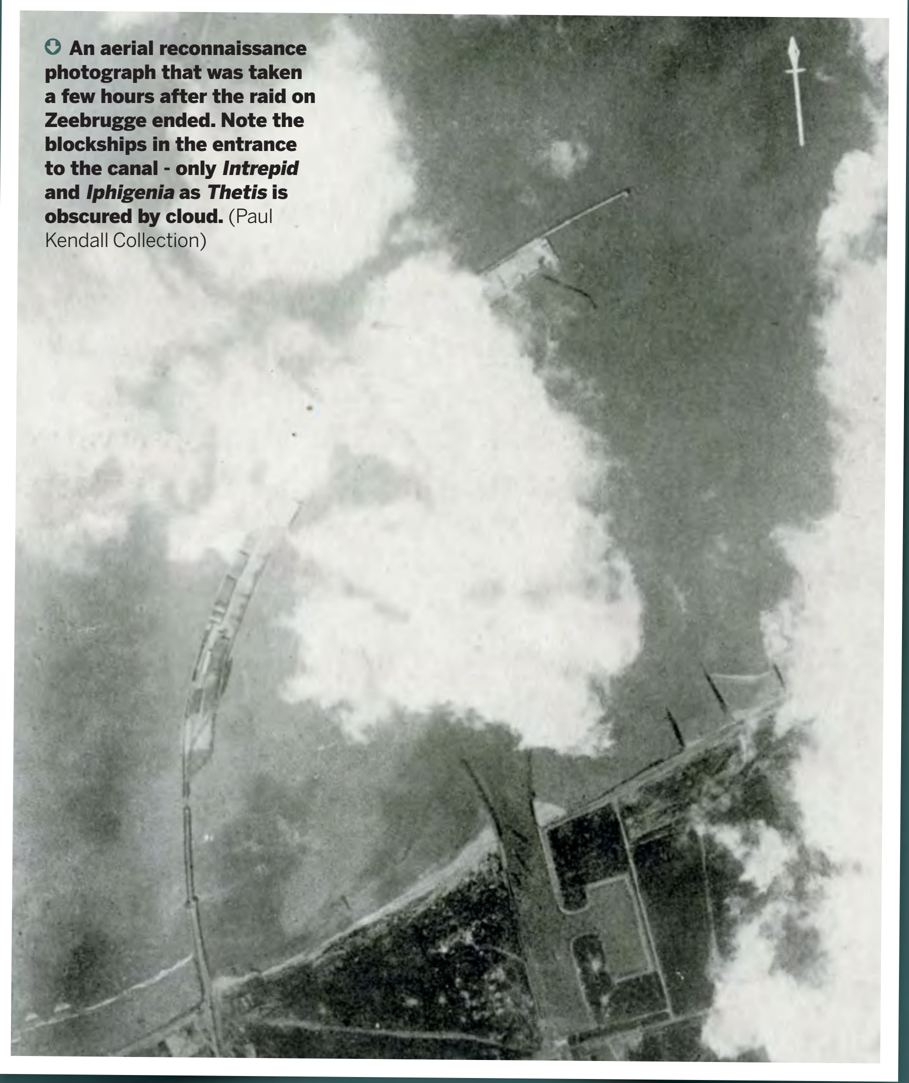
The cloudy, rain-filled skies, unfortunately, kept many of the night bombers on the ground, and aeroplanes played only a small part in the blocking operations.

One of those who did manage to take to the air was Major W.E.D. Wardrop DFM who served as an observer with 7 Squadron and recalled his part in the operation: 'Zeebrugge was the one that we actually took part in, but our role there wasn't very – how can I put it – a means to do any damage, but just to attract the searchlights and force them to put their searchlights up while our Navy tried to get in as close as they possibly could without being

An example of the Sopwith Camel which was operated by 213 Squadron.

found. But as soon as the first shot was fired by the Navy, so all the searchlights went down on the sea and they started bombarding them, of course. So far as we were concerned we were just left alone.

'We had no more to do so we came home. All we were doing was going round dropping one bomb at a time, coming in and going out again. There were several of us, we were doing that in turn, to keep on making a nuisance of ourselves to force them to put the searchlight up and the guns.'

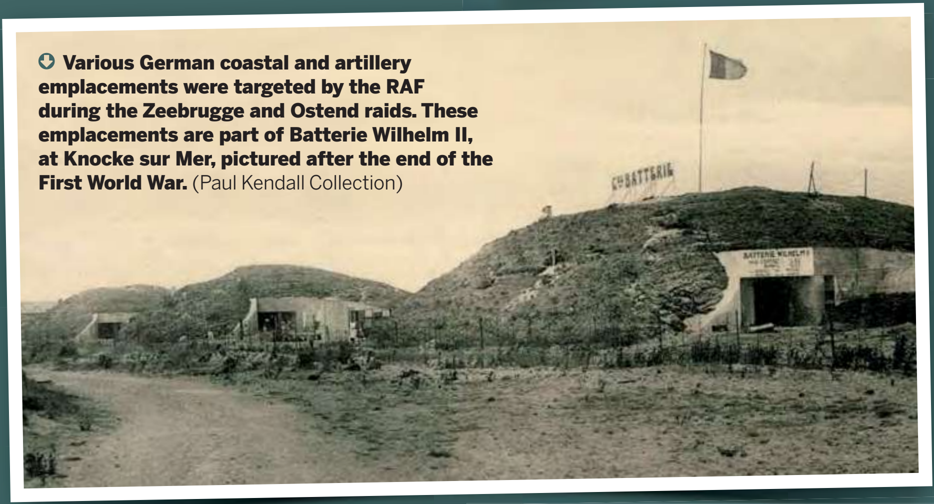


An aerial reconnaissance photograph that was taken a few hours after the raid on Zeebrugge ended. Note the blockships in the entrance to the canal - only *Intrepid* and *Iphigenia* as *Thetis* is obscured by cloud. (Paul Kendall Collection)

OSTEND

Though the RAF had only been able to make a limited contribution to the Zeebrugge Raid on the night of 22-23 April, the second attempt on Ostend, which will be described later, offered the aircraft a second chance to help the Navy. Indeed, the success of this second attack was, to a large degree due to the RAF.

This was because late on 9 May, when the expedition was already on its way, aeroplanes which had been making a seaward patrol returned to Dunkirk with news that the buoys usually off Ostend had apparently disappeared. Although darkness was setting in Major Ronald Graham and Lieutenant G.C. Mackay, in Sopwith Camels of 213 Squadron, took-off at once, and they were able to confirm, from a low height, that the buoys had been taken away. Such a move by the Germans had been thought a possibility, and a special light buoy, which had been prepared in advance, was dropped just in time to enable the attacking boats to lay smoke screens and for the blockading ships to navigate their way towards Ostend.



Various German coastal and artillery emplacements were targeted by the RAF during the Zeebrugge and Ostend raids. These emplacements are part of Batterie Wilhelm II, at Knocke sur Mer, pictured after the end of the First World War. (Paul Kendall Collection)

At 01.43 hours on the 10th, as *Vindictive* approached the entrance to the harbour at Ostend, the pre-arranged signal to open fire was given and the pre-arranged bombardment began. This included seven Handley Page bombers of 214 Squadron, which began dropping their loads at 01.45 hours. They continued to bomb for forty-five minutes, during which time six 550lb, fifty-three 112lb, and twenty-six 25lb bombs were aimed at the German batteries. Though the RAF had been unable to offer much help to the Zeebrugge raiders, they more than made amends at Ostend.

While the sea-borne operations against Zeebrugge and Ostend were at an end, the RAF continued to exploit the Royal Navy's success by impeding the enemy's efforts at clearing a way past the blockships for their vessels. In this, a series of bombing attacks were undertaken by the Sopwith Camels of 213 Squadron, using 112lb bombs.

The raids upon Zeebrugge and Ostend were truly combined operations. ⦿

A second view of a gun and emplacement of Batterie Wilhelm II, at Knocke sur Mer. Part of the battery has survived and is open to the public. (Paul Kendall Collection)

Deception and Disaster

One end of the Bruges Canal had been blocked at Zeebrugge. The next part of the operation was to cut the Flanders Flotilla's access to the sea at Ostend.

The strike against Ostend was to follow the same principles as the larger Zeebrugge assault, the aim being to sink the obsolete cruisers *Sirius* and *Brilliant* in the canal mouth. But, because the Ostend canal was the smaller and narrower of the two channels giving access to Bruges, it was considered a secondary target and far less resources were to be employed. Nevertheless, it was hoped that by mounting the two raids simultaneously, German defences would be severely stretched, enabling both attacks to succeed.

As with the operation against Zeebrugge, the ships of the assault flotilla set off during the late afternoon of 22 April to arrive at Ostend after nightfall. Monitors and destroyers were to pound the German coastal guns and a smoke screen would conceal the approach of the flotilla.

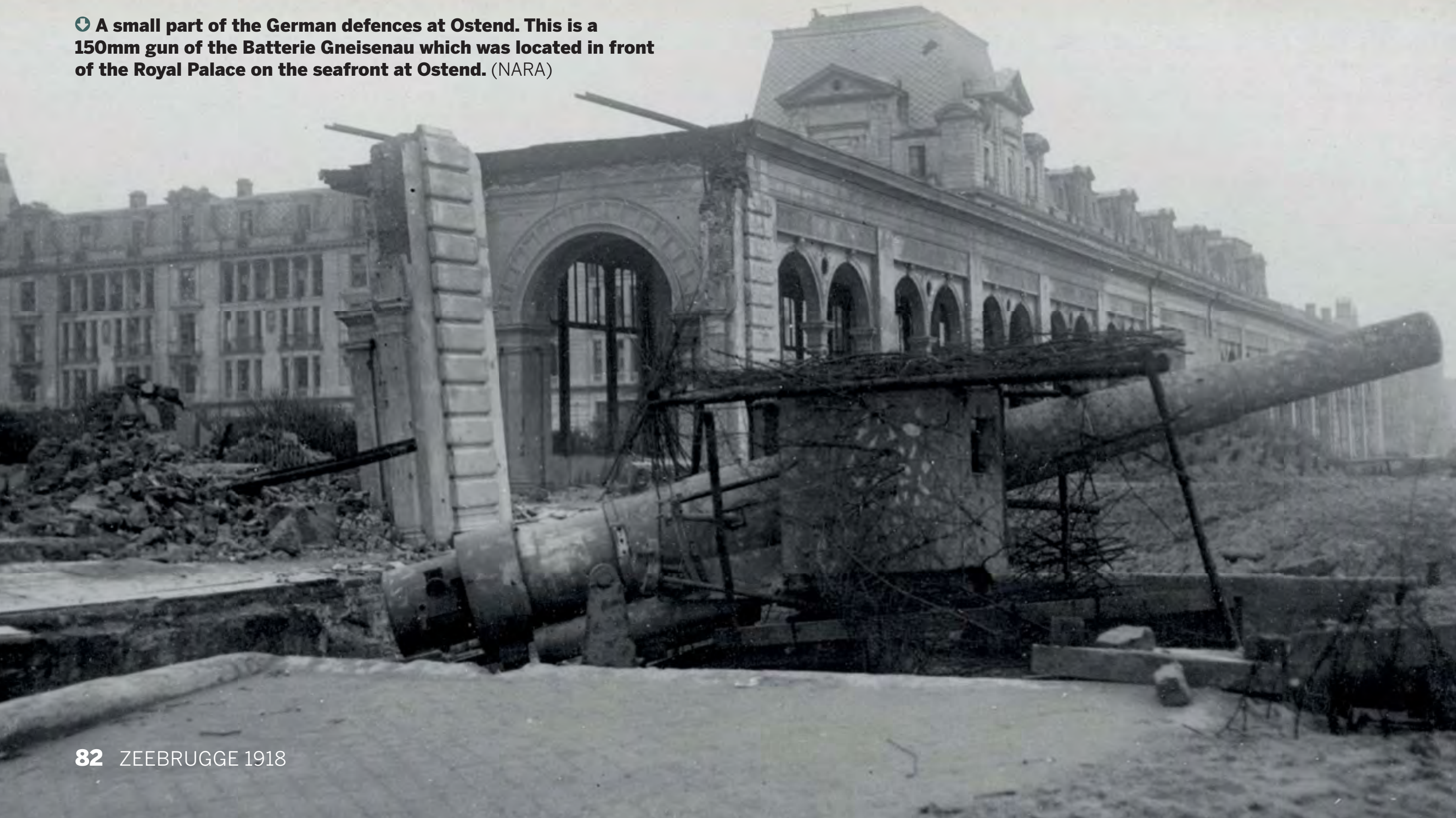
At 23.10 hours, the heavy Monitors *Marshal Soult*, *General Craufurd*, *Prince Eugene*, *Lord Clive* and smaller Monitors *M21*, *M24* and *M26*, began their bombardment of Ostend, supported by the guns of the British destroyers *Mentor*, *Lightfoot*, *Zubian* and the French vessels *Francis Garnier*, *Roux*, *Capitaine Mehl and Bouclie*. The Germans responded to the Allied bombardment, but without causing any significant damage.

Forty-five minutes later, Lieutenant Harrison, commanding the five coastal motor boats that were to lay down the smoke screen (CMB's 2, 4, 10, 12, and 19), reported that he was abeam of the Stroom Bank Buoy, having seen the identification number 25 painted on its side. At this point he instructed the four other vessels in his flotilla to commence smoke-screening. CMB 19 laid the first calcium float near to the Stroom Buoy, with a second calcium float being laid ten minutes later at Bell Buoy.

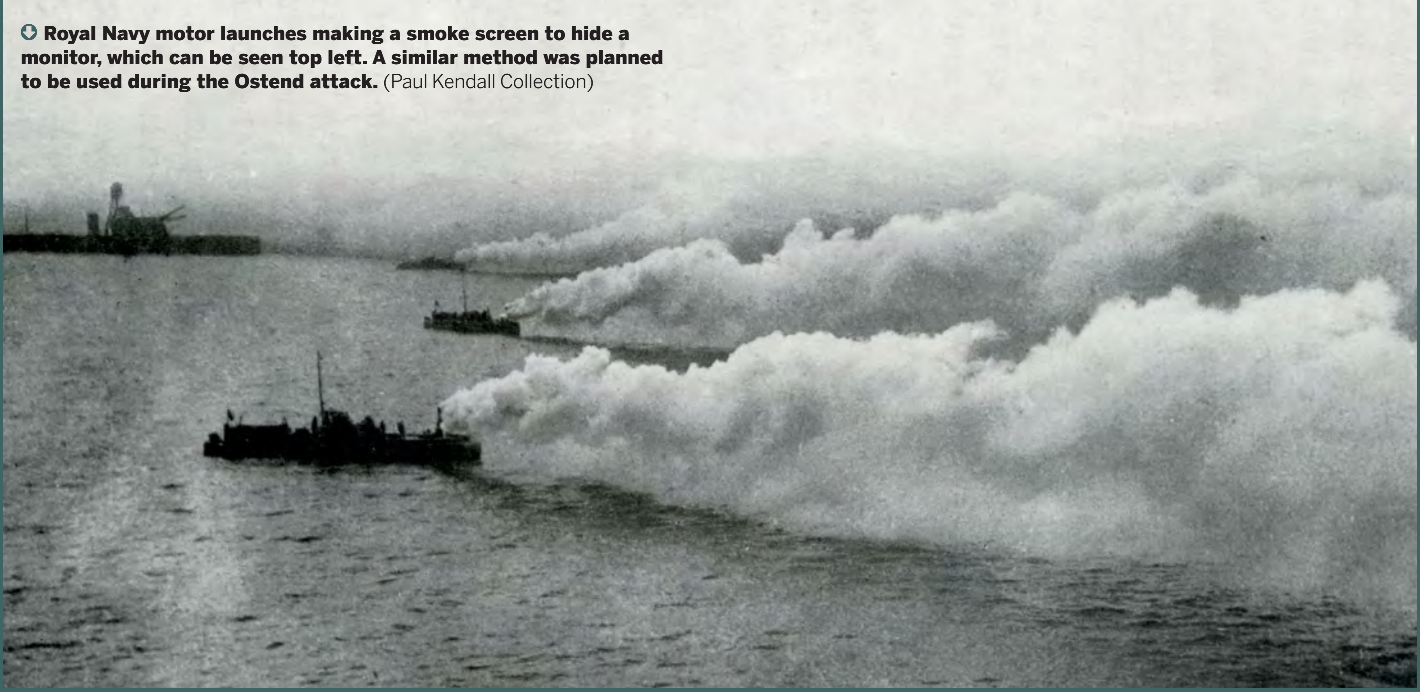
'PANDEMONIUM BROKE LOOSE'

HMS *Brilliant*, commanded by Commander Alfred Godsal, led the approach to Ostend, with Lieutenant Commander Henry Hardy in *Sirius* steaming behind, aiming, like Harrison, for the Stroom Buoy. What none of the British officers knew was that before the raid the German commander at Ostend, suspecting that any attack by the Royal Navy would take place at night, moved the Stroom Buoy 2,400 yards east of its original position. When the ships arrived at the charted position there was no sign of the buoy. Godsal decided to continue on the original course for a further two minutes.

The smoke screen had reduced visibility considerably, but at last the buoy was spotted, and both blockships immediately put their helms to starboard according to plan. They thought that they were heading for the entrance to Ostend Harbour.



A small part of the German defences at Ostend. This is a 150mm gun of the Batterie Gneisenau which was located in front of the Royal Palace on the seafront at Ostend. (NARA)



Royal Navy motor launches making a smoke screen to hide a monitor, which can be seen top left. A similar method was planned to be used during the Ostend attack. (Paul Kendall Collection)

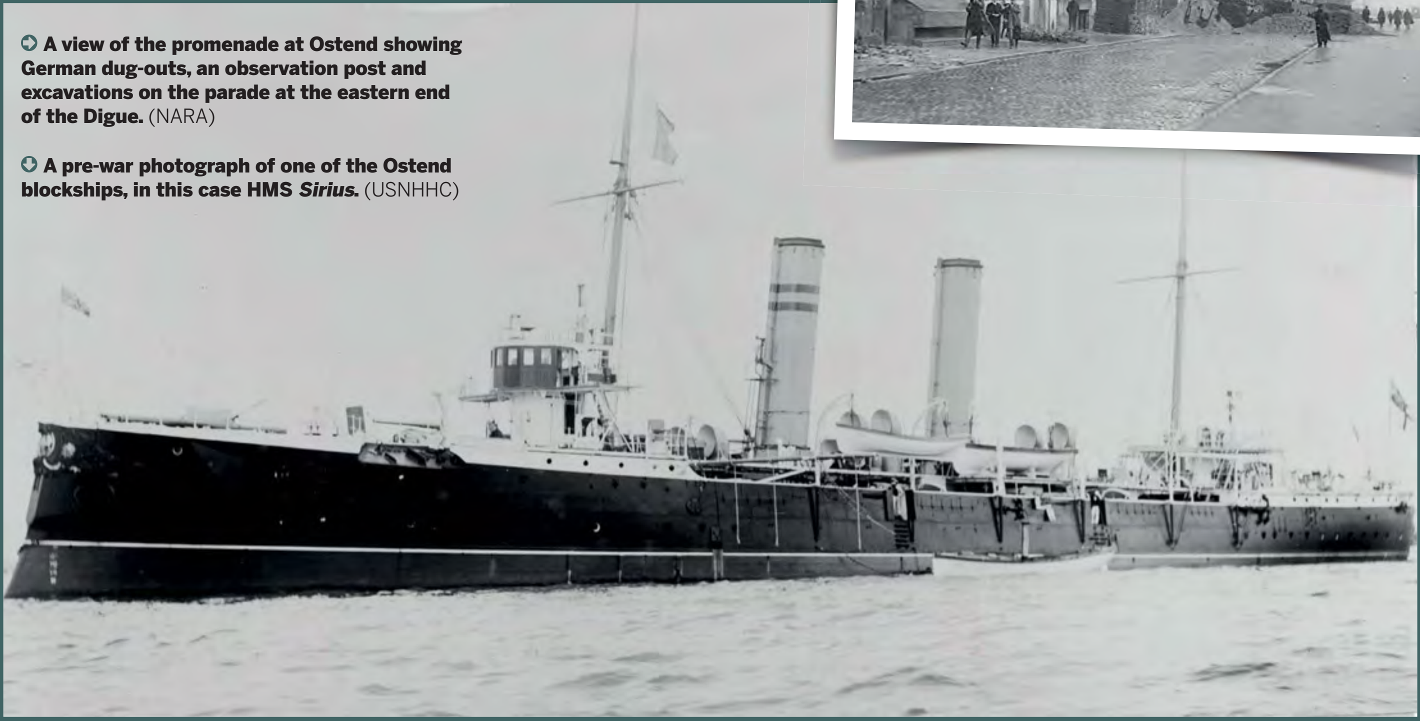
At 12.25 hours, as *Brilliant* and *Sirius* emerged from the smokescreen, they were seen by the German shore batteries, as Lieutenant Roland Bourke in one of the smoke-screen launches recalled: 'Just before the blockships arrived the wind changed to off shore and blew the smoke out to sea so that the Hun was able to pick up the Blockships at 2½ miles from the shore with his searchlights, then pandemonium broke loose. They let fly with everything from 6-inch to 15-inch batteries and star shells galore, the whole sky was alight and it was a truly wonderful sight to see these long grey warships, i.e. *Brilliant* and *Sirius*, being hit over and over again but never stopping or swerving from their course.'

Then, at 12.29 hours as she rushed at full speed towards Ostend, *Brilliant* ran aground 2,400 yards east of the canal entrance. *Sirius*, steaming for all she was worth, crashed into *Brilliant*'s stern. The German deception plan had worked to perfection, the British ships having been fooled into steaming straight onto a sandbank.

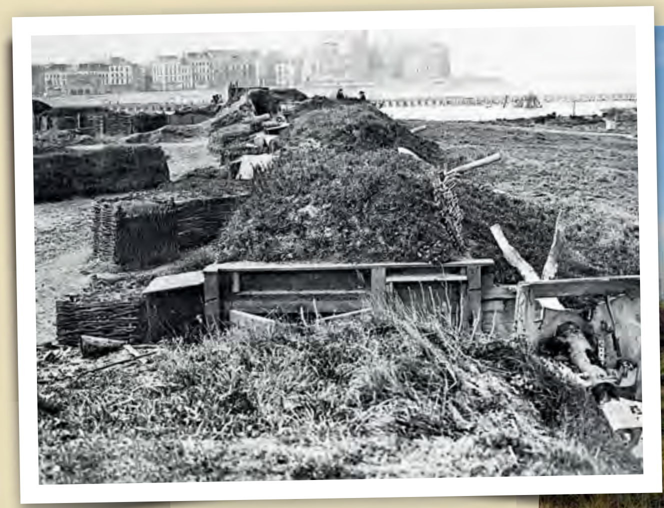
The two cruisers were stranded and sitting targets for the German gunners. The pounding they received was terrible. *Sirius* was hit four times by 8-inch and 9.4-inch shells, as well as struck by twenty 4.1-inch shells. All that could be done was to evacuate the crews as quickly as possible.

Three motor launches had accompanied the blockships to bring off the crews and these now sped into action. ML 532, commanded by Commander Ion Hamilton Benn, and ML 283, commanded by Lieutenant Keith Hoare, moved in rapidly, with Lieutenant Bourke in ML 276 standing by. 'It was a weird experience, bunches of star shell above, their shells falling all around,' Bourke later wrote, 'six big ones within 40 feet in less than a minute. The most terrifying things were the big ones rushing overhead like trains and ending with a terrific crash, also their chained

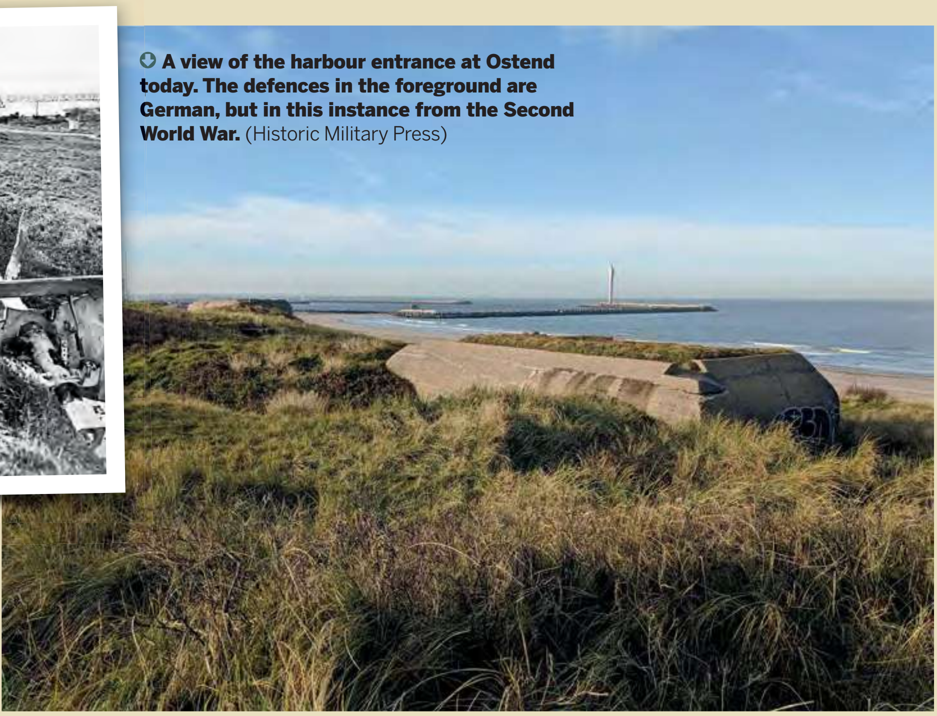
A view of the promenade at Ostend showing German dug-outs, an observation post and excavations on the parade at the eastern end of the Digue. (NARA)



A pre-war photograph of one of the Ostend blockships, in this case HMS *Sirius*. (USNHHC)



A view of German defensive positions on the seafront at Ostend. The damage to the gun emplacement seen here was not the result of the attack in April 1918, but deliberately caused by the Germans towards the war's end. The harbour and canal entrance can be seen in the distance. (HMP)



A view of the harbour entrance at Ostend today. The defences in the foreground are German, but in this instance from the Second World War. (Historic Military Press)

shot, flaming onions, which skipped along the water in great leaps, sometimes passing right over us and sometimes seeming to alter course after us and follow us round.'

Commander Benn tried to take ML 532 alongside the blockships, but it was damaged when she grounded on the same sandbank. At the same time a shell hit the motor launch, demolishing the bows from the keel to the deck. Benn ordered his engineers to stop the engines, but they were overcome by fumes. Lieutenant Kirkwood, a New Zealander, then went down into the engine room to shut down the engines, but he too was affected by the fumes and had to be rescued by Deckhand Frank Bowles who later received the DSM.

ML 532 drifted aimlessly with her exhaust pipes destroyed and both engines not working. ML 283 rescued the fifty crewmen from *Sirius*, as well as sixteen from *Brilliant* when their whaler was sunk by enemy gunfire

With ML 532 disabled, Lieutenant Bourke first took his launch alongside *Sirius*, but once he found ML 283 evacuating its crew he turned his attention to *Brilliant*, rescuing the remainder of the men.

THE RETURN

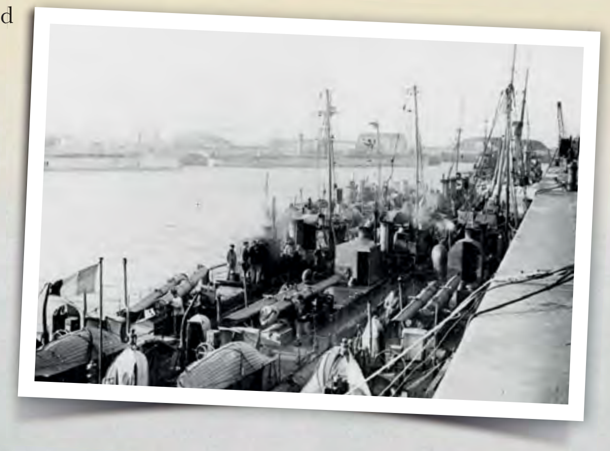
ML 532 was barely afloat as she drifted some 600 yards away from Ostend. It was only a bulkhead an eighth of an inch thick that kept it afloat. Benn flashed SOS with the launch's searchlight which was seen by Bourke who turned ML 276 round, and after several attempts attached a tow rope.

With the crews rescued, the motor launches could head for home, but Lieutenant Commander Hardy of *Sirius* believed that Engineer Lieutenant William McLaren and some other men from his ship were still stranded aboard the cruiser. So, he commandeered one of the smoke-laying boats, CMB 10, which was commanded by Sub Lieutenant Peter Clarke, and went back through the fire from machine-guns and 4.1-inch shells.

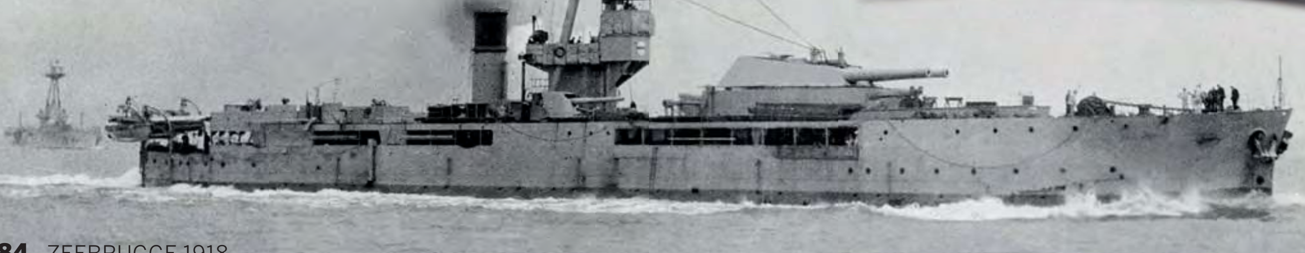
Hardy took CMB 10 alongside *Sirius* and his men searched the ship but found no-one on board. What had happened was that McLaren and the ten others had climbed into one of the ship's cutters and had rowed off into the North Sea. They travelled for thirteen miles before being picked up by another ship.

At 01.00 hours, the final retirement was signalled. As with Zeebrugge, the Morse code letter K was sounded on sirens, plus a red rocket was fired into the dark sky. With that, the motor launch flotilla headed back to Dunkirk. The last boat to reach the French port was ML 532, which limped into Dunkirk around noon.

The failure at Ostend dampened somewhat the euphoria which had surrounded news of the success at Zeebrugge. If the German submarines could still reach their hunting grounds through Ostend all the sacrifices of the men and the enormous time and effort planning the raid would have been in vain. So, even though the Germans would be fully aware that another attempt to block Ostend harbour would be made by the Royal Navy, and the Ostend garrison would be at high alert, Keyes asked his men to try once more. The date of the next suitable tide was 10 May. ◉



British and French warships in Dunkirk prior to the attack on Ostend. Three French 38-metre type torpedo boats appear in the foreground, whilst two Royal Navy Lord Clive-class monitors are moored in the left background. (USNHHC)



One of the heavy monitors involved in the Ostend operation, HMS *General Craufurd*, pictured underway. The main armament on the Lord-Clive class consisted of a single twin 12-inch gun turret taken from decommissioned Majestic-class pre-dreadnought class battleships.

To Try and Try Again

The Zeebrugge and Ostend raids on St George's Day were celebrated as daring and bold enterprises, but as far as the Navy was concerned, the job was far from done.

Though the attempt to block the entrance to the Bruges Canal at Ostend had failed, it was not the Royal Navy's way to give up and the men that returned from the first effort begged to be allowed a second try. Commander Alfred Godsal was therefore, once again, to lead the mission with his crew of six officers and forty-eight other ranks all being men from the first attempt by *Brilliant*.

This time, it would be the battered cruiser *Vindictive* that would be used, despite strong pressure from many to preserve her as a national monument. This prompted Engineer Commander W.A. Bury, who had been on *Vindictive* at Zeebrugge, to volunteer for the Ostend raid on the basis that he knew the ship well. He also asked that Engine Room Artificers Hubert Cavanagh, Norman Carroll, Alan Thomas and Herbert Harris be permitted to accompany him.

Lieutenant Sir John Alleyne from the Monitor *Lord Clive* volunteered for the role of navigator aboard *Vindictive* when he was sent to repair the compass, which had been damaged during the Zeebrugge Raid. When he heard that *Vindictive* was going to Ostend, he applied to join the mission on the basis that he had plenty of experience navigating off the Belgian coast during the previous three years with the Dover Patrol and was familiar with the tides and shoals peculiar to that area.

Work was hurriedly undertaken to prepare *Vindictive* for her final voyage. Two hundred tons of cement were placed in her hold, replacing casings that protected the funnels and the superstructure. Her crew was selected from volunteers who served on Dover Patrol vessels.

While waiting for the date selected for the operation, 10 May, another blockship was prepared – the Apollo-class cruiser HMS *Sappho*. Lieutenant Commander Hardy was appointed as commander and was accompanied by officers from *Sirius*. The crew was selected from volunteers at Chatham.

As before, the raiders would be supported by four heavy monitors under Keyes' command, eight destroyers under Commodore Hubert Lynes in HMS *Faulknor* and five motor launches, including Lieutenant Bourke who again skippered ML 276.

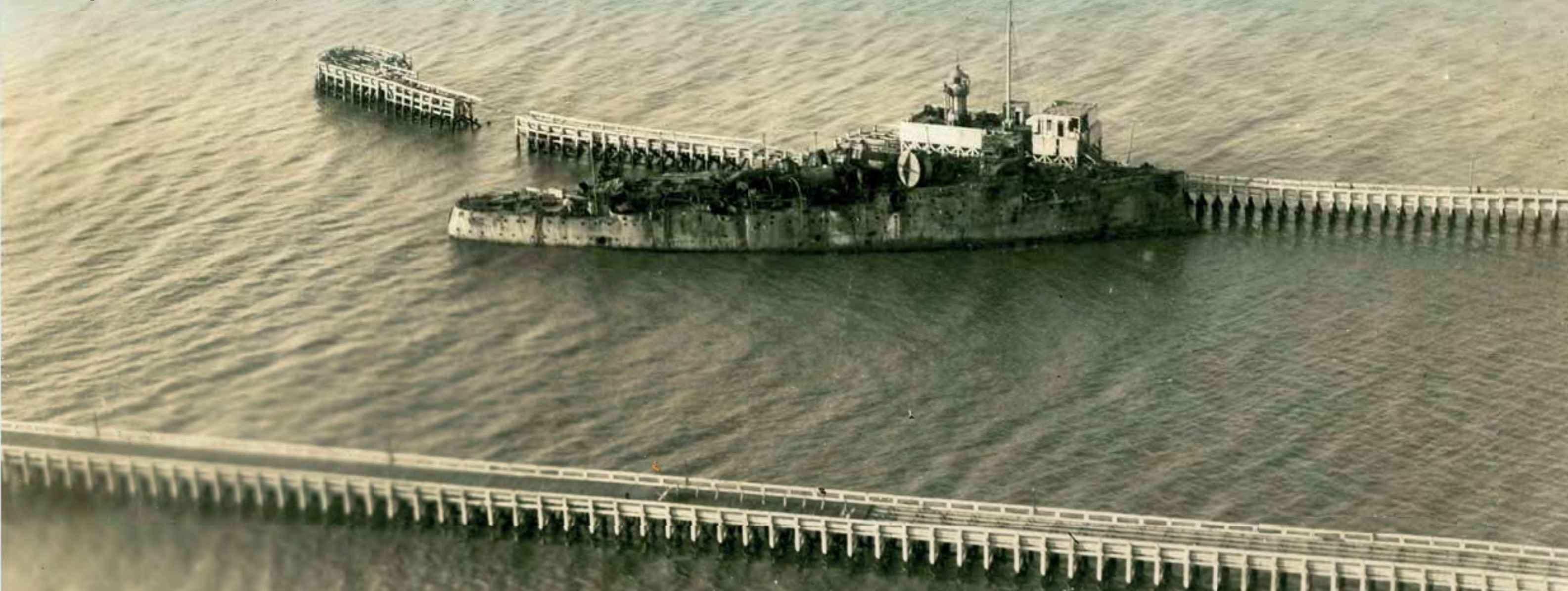
THE FOG OF WAR

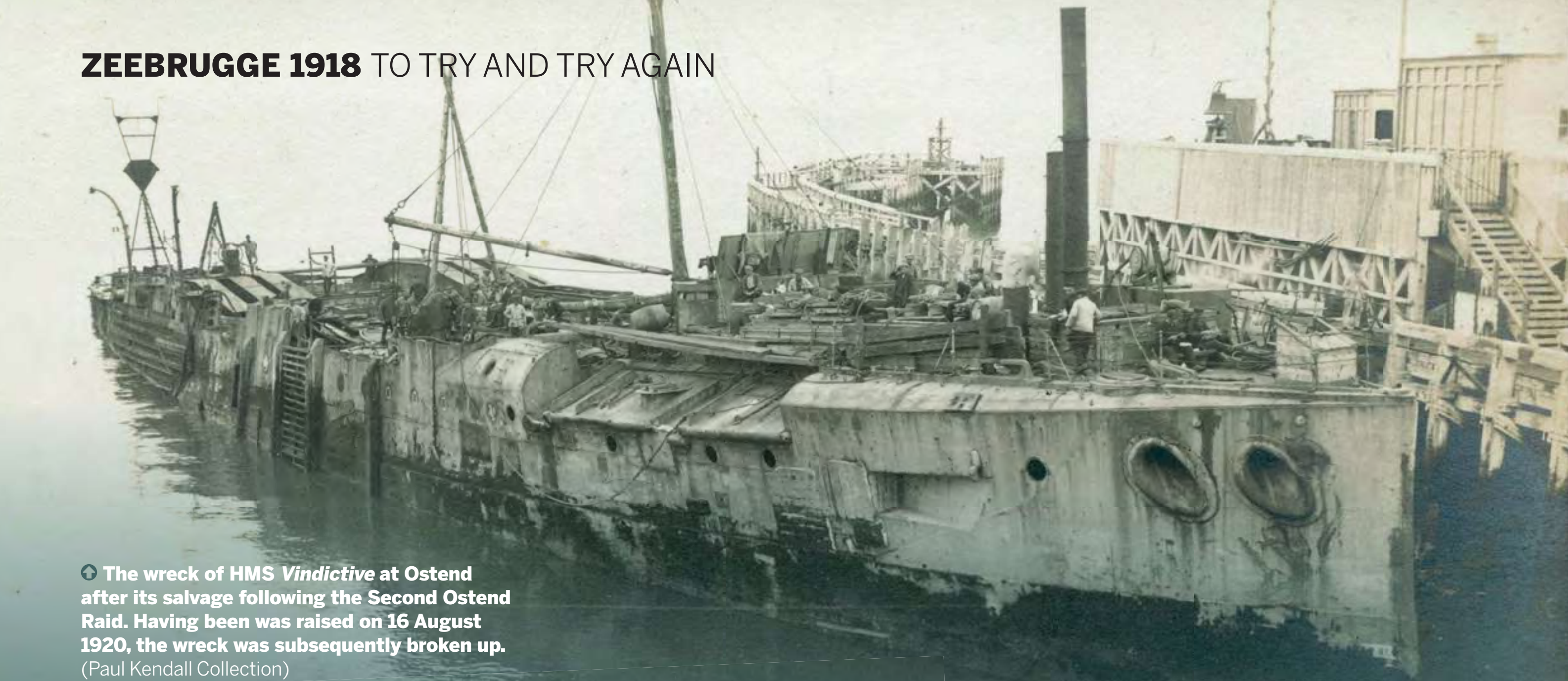
On the evening of 9 May, *Vindictive* and *Sappho* sailed towards Dunkirk to rendezvous with Lynes' ships. The weather seemed ideal and hopes were running high. However, *Sappho* then suffered trouble in the engine room when, just after midnight, a hole was blown in one of the boilers while she was off the coast at Dunkirk. *Sappho* could only limp along and it was clear she would never be able to reach Ostend in time or stand any chance of charging past the 11-inch guns of the Tirpitz battery which guarded the harbour. *Sappho* returned to Dunkirk, leaving *Vindictive* to carry on alone.

Learning from the last attempt, a buoy had been positioned earlier that evening off the coast of Ostend to mark the point where *Vindictive* was to turn at right angles and head straight for the harbour entrance. This buoy was reached at 01.30 hours and *Vindictive* turned for the run-in to Ostend. At the same time the bombardment of the port began.

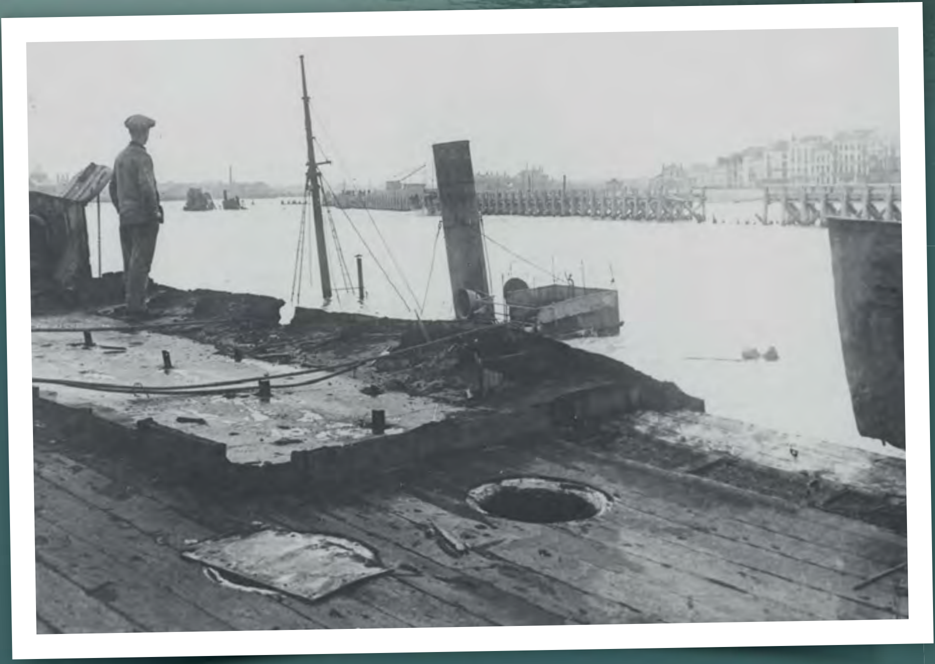
The German gunners were quick to respond, as Lieutenant Alleyne later recalled: 'The sky was lit up with star shells and brilliant green strings of flaming onions came bouncing along the water like sea serpents, and shells were dropping all round. But the smoke screen seemed to be very effective and I don't think we had been sighted from the shore; the batteries seemed to be only putting down a barrage and the ship was not hit at this time.'

An aerial view of the wreck of HMS *Vindictive* during the salvage process at Ostend. (Paul Kendall Collection)





The wreck of HMS *Vindictive* at Ostend after its salvage following the Second Ostend Raid. Having been was raised on 16 August 1920, the wreck was subsequently broken up. (Paul Kendall Collection)



The view of the harbour and canal entrance at Ostend as seen from the deck of HMS *Vindictive*, looking across the western jetty, during its salvage. The twin towers of the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul can be seen in the distance. To the left can be seen a dredger, and, beyond HMS *Vindictive*, a lighter sunk by the Germans to block the Channel later in the war. (HMP)

A salvage team at work on the wreck of HMS *Vindictive* at Ostend. (Paul Kendall Collection)

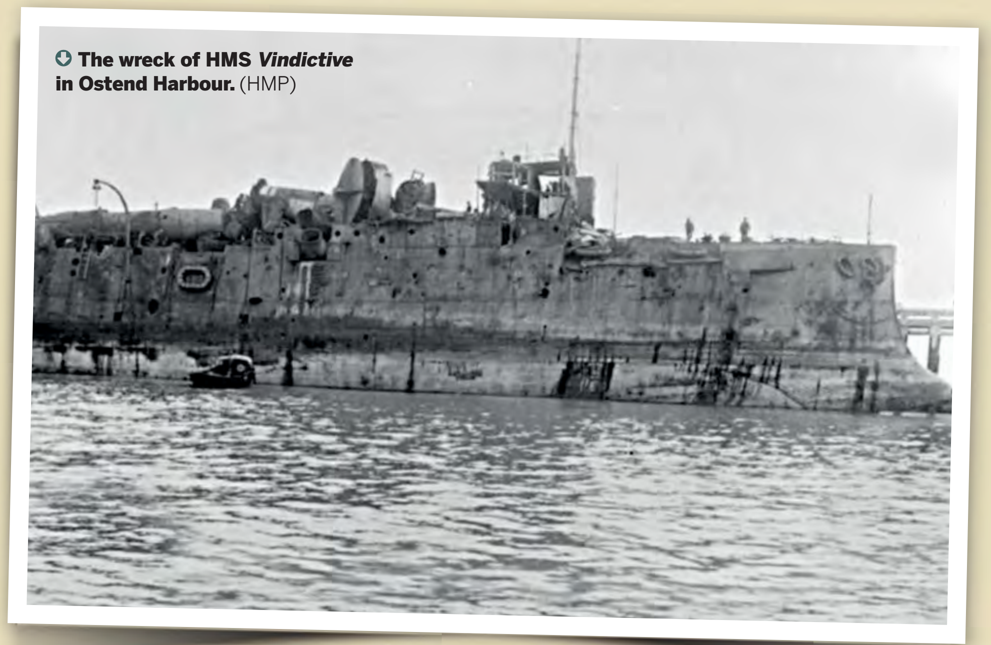
HMS *Vindictive* had been fortunate so far, but a very heavy fog suddenly descended, completely blanketing the Belgian coastline. Alleyne continued his narrative, as the cruiser closed in upon the port: 'When by dead reckoning we should have been in a position close off the pier heads we could still see absolutely nothing but smoke and fog and fireworks, so as we knew we must be close in to the beach and had no room to spare we turned on to a course parallel to the shore and searched to the south westward and then to the north eastward. At one moment, under a burst of star shell, we plainly saw the houses on the sea front, close on our port beam, but we knew it must be somewhere quite close. The ship was hit occasionally during this time, but I think we were only visible from the shore for short periods, through rifts in the fog and smoke.'

'There seemed nothing more to be done than to continue to search alternately to the north eastward and south westward, but after about twenty minutes of this, with an ebbing tide and none too much water to spare in the harbour entrance, things were looking pretty desperate.'

The Germans were as confused as the men onboard *Vindictive*, some believing that there was more than one blockship, as the cruiser rushed backwards and forwards in front of them.

INTO THE HARBOUR

The crew of *Vindictive* despaired of locating the entrance, when suddenly one of the pier heads loomed into view through the gloom, plainly silhouetted under the burst of star shell, only about 400 or 500 yards away on the starboard quarter. This was too close for Godsal to be able to turn into the harbour, so he swung *Vindictive* hard to port to take her out to sea.



The wreck of HMS *Vindictive* in Ostend Harbour. (HMP)

Now correctly positioned, Godsal pointed *Vindictive*'s bows at the harbour entrance and charged full ahead. *Vindictive* rushed through the fog into the guns of the defenders who, at last, had a clear target to aim at. Heavy fire poured in on *Vindictive* as she steamed into the harbour, every enemy gun being brought to bear upon her. Godsal aimed to swing *Vindictive* round to block the canal entrance broadside on, but before he could do this the starboard screw broke and the cruiser did not turn fully sideways on. It was just at that moment a shell hit the bridge, killing Godsal and most of those around him.

Taking over from Godsal, a badly wounded Lieutenant Victor Crutchley tried to move *Vindictive* across the canal entrance by ordering full speed astern on the port telegraph, but the damaged propeller made this manoeuvre impossible and the drifting cruiser floated out of the channel and became stuck on a sandbank, only partially blocking the canal.

COMMANDER
A.E. GODSAL D.S.O. R.N.

The CWGC headstone on the grave of 33-year-old Commander Alfred Edmund Godsal in Oostende New Communal Cemetery. (Historic Military Press)

Quickly realising that there was nothing else he could achieve, Crutchley ordered the ship to be scuttled where she lay. Those men in the engine room were ushered onto the deck and the scuttling charges blown. The order to abandon ship was given, as the ship slumped onto her side at an angle of 30 degrees.

A cutter was lowered into the water and the officers and men dropped into the boat, hoping that the rescue launches would have followed *Vindictive*. But only Lieutenant Geoffrey Drummond's ML 254 had been able to keep up with the blockship in the fog.

ML 254 was riddled with holes. The launch's executive officer had been killed and Drummond himself was wounded, a piece of shell fragment or shrapnel having lodged behind his collar bone within a fraction of his lungs. Somehow, ML 254 managed to escape from the harbour, though barely afloat, with thirty-eight survivors of *Vindictive*'s crew.

As the launch headed out to sea, she was passed by Bourke's ML 276 which had finally caught up. Drummond called out to Bourke that he believed there were still men in the harbour in the water. Bourke took ML 254 into Ostend with shells and bullets striking the sea all around.

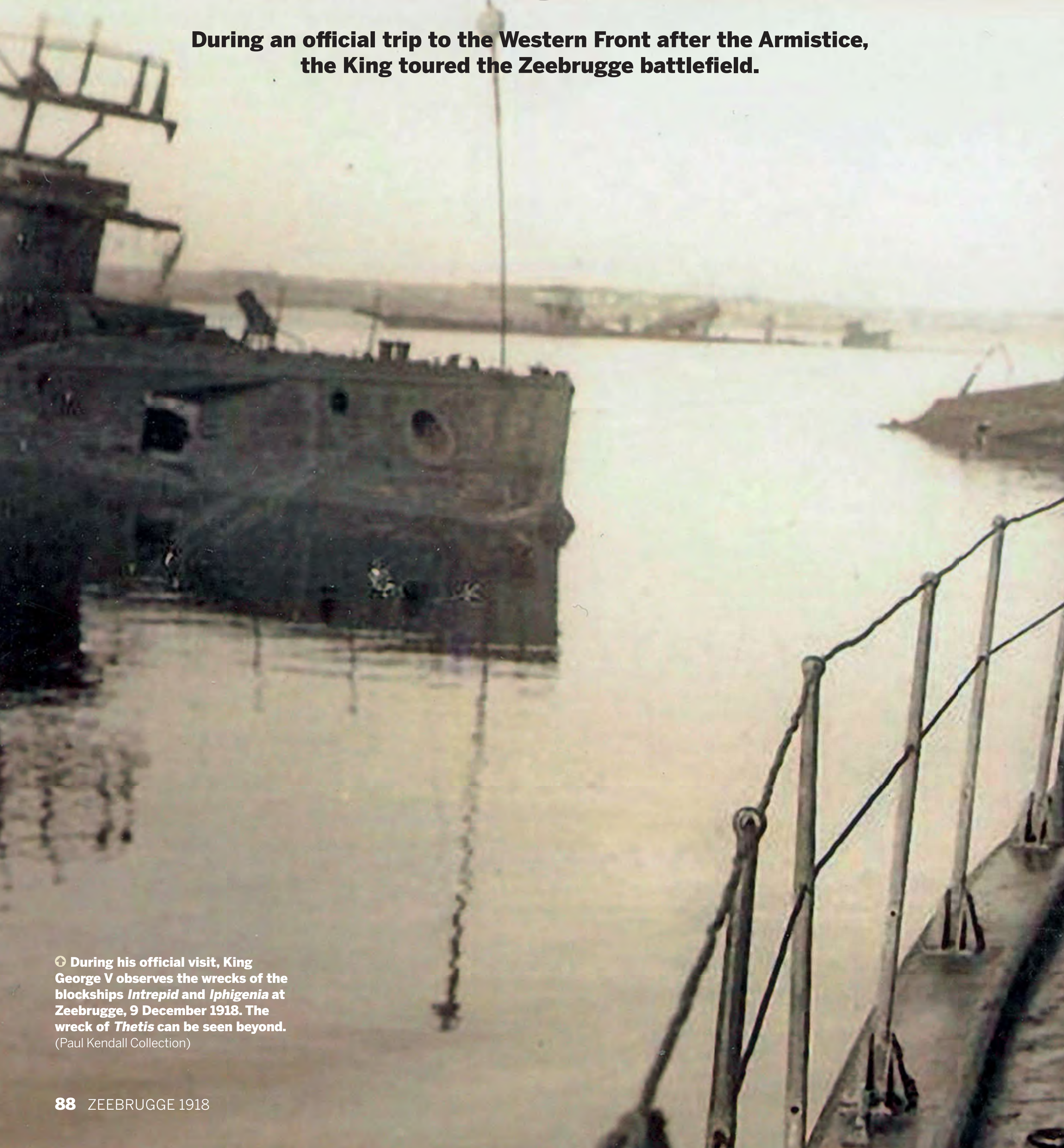
Bourke sailed round hearing cries from the stranded sailors, but he could not find them. Four times he sailed along *Vindictive* before he eventually found two sailors and Alleyne, who was severely wounded.

ML 276 was hit repeatedly but she made it out of the harbour, being found by HMS *Prince Eugene*, the crew and survivors from *Vindictive* being transfered to the monitor. When she was examined afterwards, it was found that ML 276 had been holed fifty-five times. ◉

The graves of Allied personnel in Oostende New Communal Cemetery, some of whom were casualties from the Zeebrugge and Ostend raids. (NARA)

The King's Visit

During an official trip to the Western Front after the Armistice, the King toured the Zeebrugge battlefield.



⇧ During his official visit, King George V observes the wrecks of the blockships *Intrepid* and *Iphigenia* at Zeebrugge, 9 December 1918. The wreck of *Thetis* can be seen beyond. (Paul Kendall Collection)

On Wednesday, 27 November 1918, King George V sailed from Dover on the destroyer HMS *Broke*. His destination was Boulogne, and the start of his seventh visit to his 'armies in the field'. He had given instructions that the itinerary should include a tour of sites relating to the raids on Zeebrugge and Ostend.

The King's visit to that part of the Belgian coast came at the end of his official visit to France and Flanders. He left Lille on the morning of Monday, 9 December accompanied by the Prince of Wales, Prince Albert and members of his staff. His last act there was to carry out an inspection of a guard of honour furnished by the 1st Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers. An official account of the King's tour details his next steps:

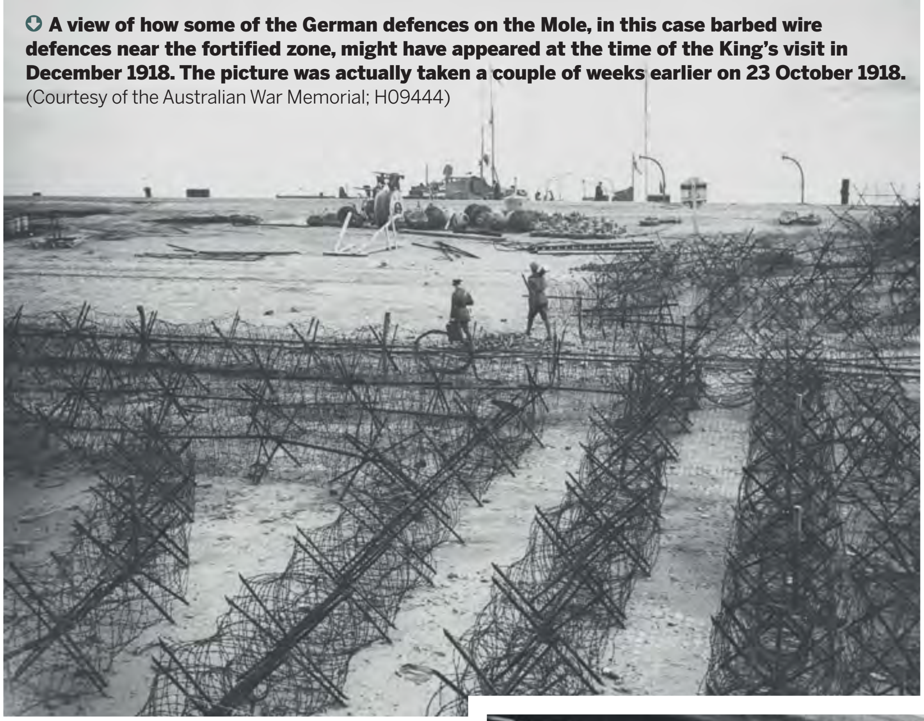
'His Majesty then drove through Bruges to Zeebrugge, and in the neighbourhood of the lock-gates of the Canal was met by the King of the Belgians, Vice-Admiral Sir Roger Keyes and Staff. His Majesty then viewed the scene of the British Naval operations against Zeebrugge, and as the tide was low a good view was obtained of the British block ships that had been sunk during the night attack of the 22nd-23rd April last.

'Embarking on a motor launch with the King of the Belgians, His Majesty went across and landed on the Zeebrugge Mole, where a number of German guns are still to be seen. Walking back along the Mole to the neighbourhood of the place where a breach had been made in the Mole by the British submarine that had been exploded for this purpose, luncheon was had out of doors.

'Shortly afterwards the King of the Belgians departed to return to Brussels, and the King continued to drive on towards Knocke, where a derelict German 12-inch gun was seen in its concrete emplacement.

'The King then returned via Blankenberghe [*sic*], and through Bruges to the Château de Lophen, where His Majesty was received by the owner, Baron A. Van Caloen. The weather was fine, and the sun shone brightly most of the day. The distance covered was 70 miles.'

Having stayed overnight at the Château, the King, again accompanied by the Prince of Wales, Prince Albert and his staff, left at 10.00 hours the next morning to resume his tour:



A view of how some of the German defences on the Mole, in this case barbed wire defences near the fortified zone, might have appeared at the time of the King's visit in December 1918. The picture was actually taken a couple of weeks earlier on 23 October 1918. (Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial; H09444)

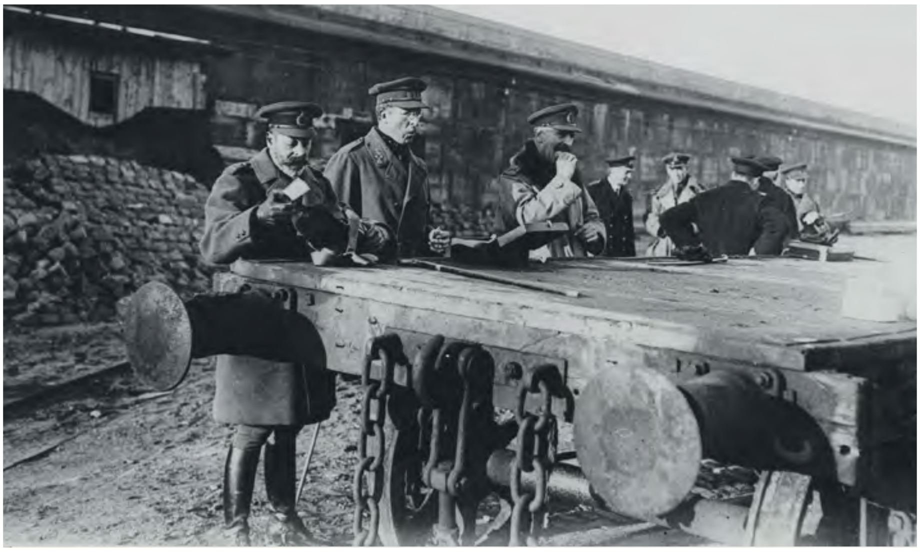
'[He] went by motor car to Bruges Docks. At this point His Majesty was met by Vice-Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, and a visit was paid to the submarine sheds constructed by the Germans. The earliest submarine shed, which was partly made of brick, had been destroyed by British aircraft and, in consequence of this, the Germans had begun constructing a series of some ten shelters – only eight of which were complete. The roof of these sheds is composed of solid concrete 11 feet thick, and although a British 500-lb. bomb had been dropped on this target, little or no impression had been made on the structure. From seeing these shelters, it can be realised what an invaluable base Bruges was to enemy submarines.

'Except for the docks, where a variety of ships had been sunk, little or no damage has been done to Bruges town itself.

'On leaving Bruges, the King went on to Ostend, and from the seafront, which is somewhat damaged by shell fire and batteries that the enemy themselves blew up before leaving, a view was obtained of the *Vindictive* lying off the pier where she had been sunk.

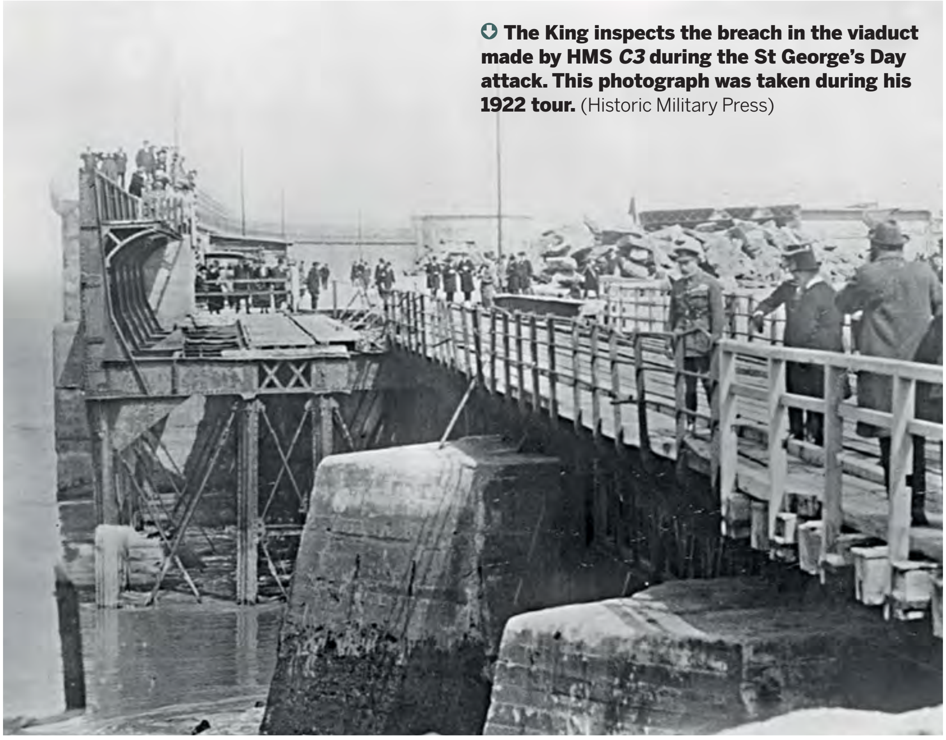
'His Majesty then proceeded to Logenboom, where, in a small wood, the Germans had built a large 15-inch gun emplacement. This was heavily protected by concrete, and had been carefully hidden by camouflage. It was this gun that was chiefly used for the long-range bombardment of Dunkirk; the breach of the gun has been blown out, and the gun itself has been fired into the concrete embankment – but otherwise it remains intact.

'At Logenboom the Prince of Wales took leave of His Majesty in order to reach Brussels during the daylight. Passing through Furnes,



The King, accompanied by King Albert I, King of the Belgians, is pictured taking lunch on the Mole at Zeebrugge, 9 December 1918. A railway goods truck served as a table. (NARA)

King George V, again with King Albert I of the Belgians and Vice-Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, on the parapet of the Mole at Zeebrugge, 9 December 1918. (Paul Kendall Collection)



The King inspects the breach in the viaduct made by HMS *C3* during the St George's Day attack. This photograph was taken during his 1922 tour. (Historic Military Press)

where His Majesty had luncheon, the King then went on to Calais via Dunkirk. At Calais His Majesty was met by the Commander-in-Chief, Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig … The King embarked on HMS *Broke* … and left Calais Harbour at 3.5 p.m., reaching Dover about 4.30 p.m. after a rough crossing.'

A correspondent from the Press Association was amongst the King's party for his Zeebrugge visit. Part of his account was printed in the *Dundee Courier* on 11 December:

'We all proceeded to the entrance of the lock gates under the guidance of Admiral Sir Roger Keyes and some other naval officers who had been engaged in the task of bottling up the harbour. It was a perfect day as we walked out alongside the two battered vessels that succeeded in closing Zeebrugge to enemy warships.

The Kaiser and staff inspecting the blockships at Zeebrugge on 23 April 1918. (Paul Kendall Collection)

An earlier 'royal' visit to Zeebrugge. Here, Kaiser Wilhem II (second from left) and Admiral Ludwig von Schröder (first from right) are seen on the Mole at Zeebrugge during the morning after the raid on 23 April 1918. Schröder was commander of the Marinekorps Flandern. (Paul Kendall Collection)

'The *Iphigenia* lay right athwart the entrance, and the *Intrepid* a few yards further on. Some distance further back was the wreck of the *Thetis*, which had been entrusted with the task of ramming the lock gate, but, unfortunately, fouled cable with her propellers, and was sunk before she could reach the objective. She was able, however, to guide the two others to their positions by her signals. Away on our left stretched the mole, against which the old *Vindictive* lay.

'We boarded a small motor launch at the lock gate, and ran across to view it at close quarters, coming up alongside one of our light cruisers that were moored there and climbing up on the mole from her deck.

'Certainly it is a marvellous piece of work this mole at Zeebrugge. The width of it fairly astonished me. It must have been 70 to 80 yards across, and perhaps 30 feet above the surface of the water. As to length, all I can say is that it seemed interminable when I started to walk back from the farther end. The place was a small town of workshops, casemates, and other buildings, some made of wood, but the majority of reinforced concrete, one or two of the latter still unfinished.

'We walked across the far end and were shown the exact place where the *Vindictive* grappled the parapet with her anchors. Part of the parapet had been broken away there.

'In the afternoon we went out in the direction of Knocke, and examined the remains of some of the German coast defence works. They had been very lavish of barbed wire all along the line, and there were still some of their big naval guns in position, though measures had been taken to render them useless before the evacuation. We saw one monster 12-inch gun against which our monitors had evidently made good practice. The labour of setting it up in that position among the sand dunes with all its apparatus must have been tremendous.' ◉

Remembering the Sacrifice

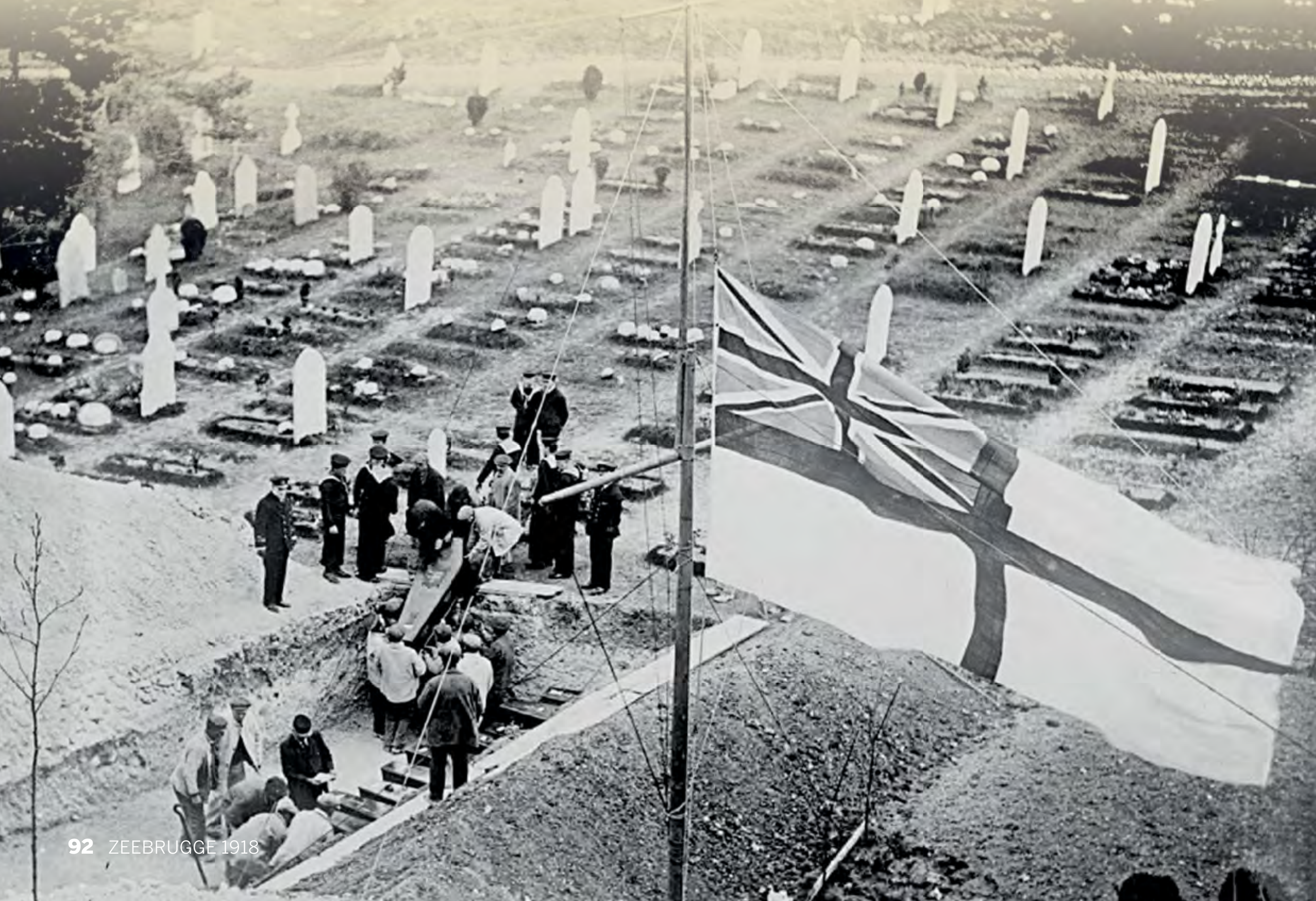
A total of 176 men lost their lives at Zeebrugge, with 412 wounded and forty-nine missing (though numbers vary slightly between sources), whilst a further forty-seven casualties occurred in the first Ostend raid. The desire to remember their gallantry, and to honour the survivors, led a number of acts of remembrance and commemoration.

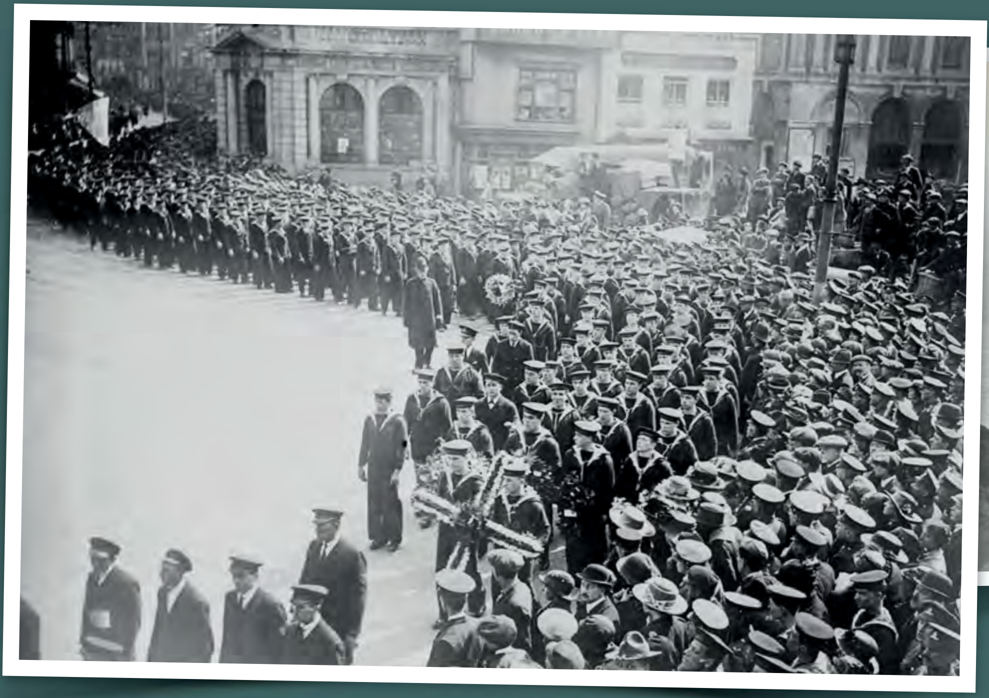
It was on 23 April 1919, twelve months after the Zeebrugge Raid, that the events of that memorable day were first commemorated with the unveiling of a memorial tablet, remembering those who fell, in Canterbury Cathedral. The ceremony was performed by Captain R.S. Sneyd, DSO, captain of HMS *Thetis*, with the tablet being erected by Admiral Keyes, some of the members of the Dover Patrol, and the Kent Branch of the Royal Society of St. George.

Among those present at the service were Admiral Sir D. Sturdee, Rear-Admiral F. Dampier, who had taken command of the Dover Patrol, Admiral Kingsford, Admiral Sir E. Rice, Captain Hamilton Benn, M.P., Flag Lieutenant Rhodes, Flag Lieutenant Howson, the Mayor of Canterbury, Major General Dallas, Lord George Hamilton, Lord Northbourne, Lieutenant Colonel F.B.C.B. Chichester, and the Mayor of Dover. A sailor on crutches who had served on HMS *Vindictive* and was severely wounded during the attack was in the congregation.

After the unveiling of the tablet, special dedication prayers were said by the Dean of Canterbury for those, 'whose lives were sacrificed in the discharge of their duty to King and country in the naval action at Zeebrugge'. This was followed by an address by the Reverend Jackson, late Chaplain to Vice-Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, in which he said that, 'The splendid audacity and singular contempt of death that was displayed at Zeebrugge made an impression upon the country and upon the world which would never be forgotten'. Guards of honour were provided by naval men from the Dover Patrol and a party of Marines from Deal.

The coffins of some of the Zeebrugge casualties are lowered into the ground in St James's Cemetery, Dover. (NARA)





The funeral possession for many of those killed during the Zeebrugge and Ostend raids winds its way through the streets of Dover towards St James's Cemetery, 27 April 1918. (NARA)

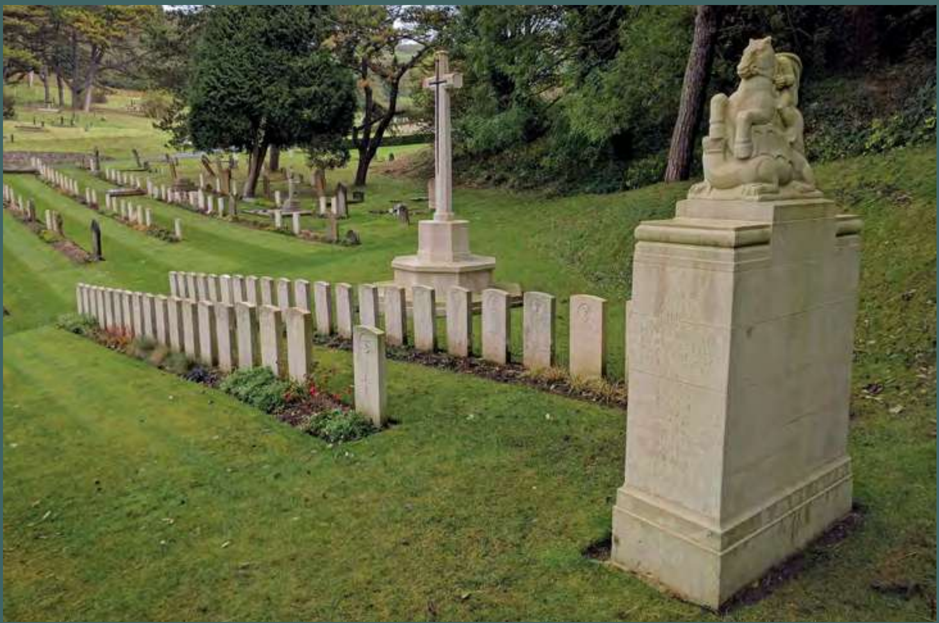
Used by the Germans as an alarm in the event of an attack, this bell, pictured in situ at the extreme end of the Mole at Zeebrugge, was later presented to the people of Dover. (Paul Kendall Collection)

THE ZEEBRUGGE MEMORIAL

That morning, all survivors of the Zeebrugge Raid received a post card inscribed with the legend, 'In memory of St. George's Day, 1918' from Sir Roger and Lady Keyes .The anniversary was also celebrated in Dover where the large German bell, which a year before had rung the alarm on Zeebrugge Mole as the raiding squadron came into sight, was again rung. The bell had been mounted outside the Town Hall, and at noon the Mayor, Mr. Edwin Farley, struck eight bells upon it. The same bell still hangs outside the Town Hall today.

An official film was played at cinemas showing the Mole and HMS *Vindictive*, with her honourable scars and tattered flag, after which collections were taken for a permanent memorial to be erected at Zeebrugge, organized by the Anglo-Belgian Union. It was hoped that £30,000 could be raised for the memorial, towards which the people of Bruges had already promised the sum of £5,000. The exact form the memorial was to take had not been decided upon at that stage, but it was planned to be erected by the side of the Zeebrugge Canal within thirty yards of the place of the landing.

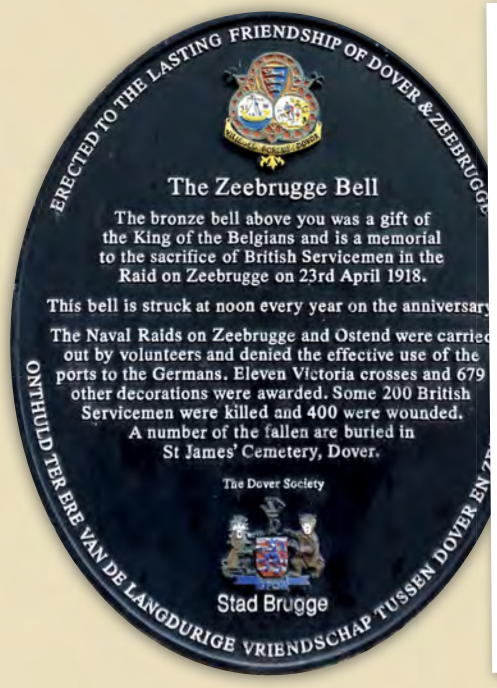
The target figure having been reached, the foundation stone of the memorial was laid on 23 April 1923. The events of that day at Zeebrugge began with the arrival of the British destroyer HMS *Vimiera* steaming into the harbour, on board which was Roger Keyes and many of the officers and naval ratings who had taken part in the raid. The point at which the representatives of the Royal Navy landed again was within a few yards of the great gap that was blown in the viaduct by HMS *C3*. Though the viaduct had been sufficiently repaired to allow the passage of motor vehicles, signs of the damage it had received were still to be seen.



The so-called 'Zeebrugge Plot' in St James's Cemetery, Dover. There are 373 identified burials of the 1914-1918 war in the cemetery. In addition, there are nineteen unidentified burials, nine of whom can be named as victims of the Zeebrugge Raid, and these nine are inscribed on a special memorial on the Cross of Sacrifice (seen here). In the foreground is a memorial to Sir Roger Keyes. (Historic Military Press)

The 'Zeebrugge Bell' which still hangs on the wall of the Town Hall in Dover. (Historic Military Press)

Exactly two years later, on 23 April 1925, Royal Naval personnel returned to Zeebrugge to witness the official unveiling of the memorial. It was situated on the shore near the entrance to the Mole. Seventy feet in height, it was in the form of a marble column, with, at its summit, a bronze figure of St. George. 'This figure of our national saint,' read the report in *The Times* of that day, 'will be the first thing to be seen by the traveller as he enters this Belgian port'.



ERECTED TO THE LASTING FRIENDSHIP OF DOVER & ZEEBRUGG

The Zeebrugge Bell

The bronze bell above you was a gift of
the King of the Belgians and is a memorial
to the sacrifice of British Servicemen in the
Raid on Zeebrugge on 23rd April 1918.

This bell is struck at noon every year on the anniversary

The Naval Raids on Zeebrugge and Ostend were carrie
out by volunteers and denied the effective use of the
ports to the Germans. Eleven Victoria crosses and 679
other decorations were awarded. Some 200 British
Servicemen were killed and 400 were wounded.
A number of the fallen are buried in
St James' Cemetery, Dover.

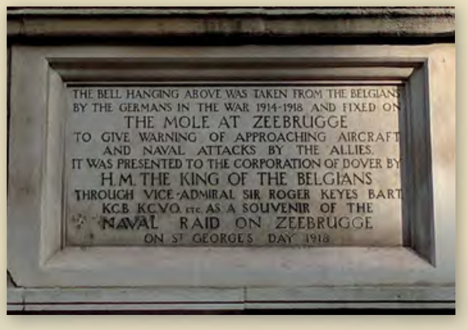
The Dover Society

Stad Brugge

ONTHULD TER ERE VAN DE LANGDURIGE VRIENDSCHAP TUSSEN DOVER EN

The King and Queen of the Belgians, accompanied by Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, at the unveiling of the Zeebrugge Memorial, 23 April 1925. (NARA)

Sergeant N.A. Finch VC (left) and CSM Barker, survivors of the Zeebrugge and Ostend operations, lay a wreath of violets in the form of a model of HMS *Vindictive* at the base of the Zeebrugge Memorial during its unveiling. (Paul Kendall Collection)



THE BELL HANGING ABOVE WAS TAKEN FROM THE BELGIANS
BY THE GERMANS IN THE WAR 1914-1918 AND FIXED ON
THE MOLE AT ZEEBRUGGE
TO GIVE WARNING OF APPROACHING AIRCRAFT
AND NAVAL ATTACKS BY THE ALLIES.
IT WAS PRESENTED TO THE CORPORATION OF DOVER BY
H.M. THE KING OF THE BELGIANS
THROUGH VICE-ADMIRAL SIR ROGER KEYES BART
K.C.B. K.C.V.O. ETC. AS A SOUVENIR OF THE
NAVAL RAID ON ZEEBRUGGE
ON ST GEORGE'S DAY 1918

Two plaques that can be seen beneath the 'Zeebrugge Bell' on the wall of the Town Hall in Dover. (Historic Military Press)

THE UNVEILING

The unveiling of the Memorial was a grand affair, as *The Times* report described: 'The King and Queen arrived from Brussels by train and left it at a special station which had been constructed at the shore end of the Mole near the Memorial.'

The British destroyer HMS *Caledon* came alongside the Mole near the viaduct at 10.00 hours. Among those who had taken part in the raid and had travelled on HMS *Caledon* were Victoria Cross recipients Captain Alfred Carpenter, Lieutenant Commander P.T. Dean and Sergeant Norman Finch.

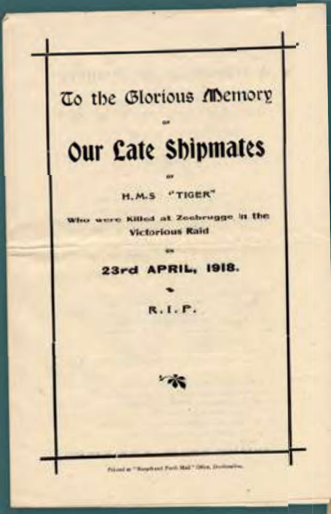
The moment then came for the unveiling. 'The King was in military uniform, and as he stood at the salute while the National Anthems of the two countries were being played the Belgian guns on shore and the British guns in *Caledon* fired a salute. He then made his way up the steps which lead to the base of the Memorial and pulled aside the flags which covered it. Another salute was fired, and for a few moments he stood alone in front of the monument saluting. He next placed a wreath at its base, and then turned to face the great crowd.

People gather on the seafront for the official unveiling of the Zeebrugge Memorial, 23 April 1925. (Historic Military Press)

‘By a happy thought on the part of the King, the crowds, which had hitherto been kept back to form a clear space around the monument, were now allowed to come forward, and it was from the very midst of them that he now began to speak in a clear voice that could be heard even above the wind and rain.’ Amongst that crowd were 250 naval ratings who had taken part in the raid, men who had been brought from Dover in *Caledon*. It was the guns of *Caledon* that fired a final salute and it was with the sound of these British guns ringing in his ears that King Albert left Zeebrugge.

‘The ceremony was most impressive,’ continued *The Times*, ‘and, in spite of the driving rain which continued throughout, was deeply affecting, but two pleasant incidents which followed had not been pre-arranged. After formal ceremonies, the King and Queen greeted Sir Roger Keyes, who was standing at the head of his men by the unveiled Memorial, and, almost shyly, the Queen slipped into his hands a handsome match-box embossed with the familiar figures of St. George and the Dragon. Then the King, in spite of the persistent rain, talked with the men drawn up behind Sir Roger Keyes, and was presented by one of them with the badge of the Zeebrugge Survivors’ Association, to which all of them belong. He at once handed it to the Queen, who pinned it in the middle of the row of medals which he was wearing.’

Afterwards members of the public filed past the Memorial, and many small bunches of flowers, in pathetic contrast to the gorgeous wreaths first put there, were then laid reverently beside them. The weather became worse and worse, but it did not prevent the inhabitants of Belgium paying honour to the British, and the crowds remained to see the naval ratings return down the Mole, where they were entertained by the Belgian authorities at luncheon on almost the exact spot where they landed seven years earlier. ◉



To the Glorious Memory

of

Our Late Shipmates

of

H.M.S "TIGER"

Who were Killed at Zeebrugge in the Victorious Raid

on

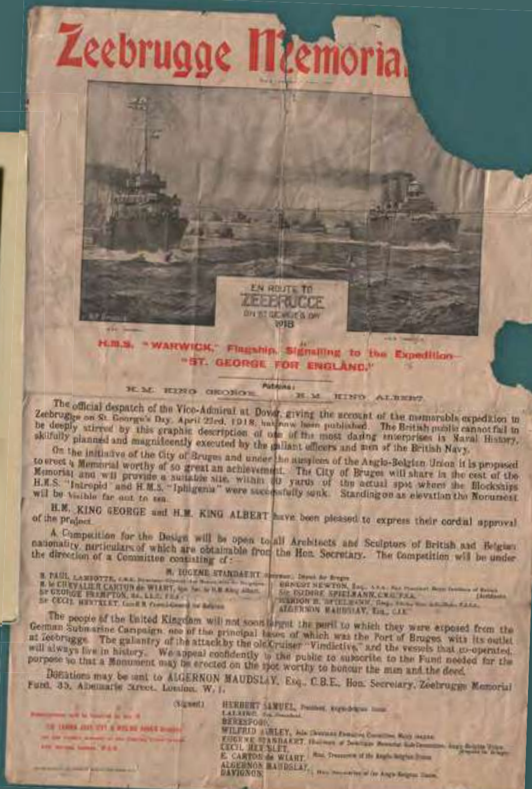
23rd APRIL, 1918.

R.I.P.

D. Drummond, A.B.
late of
H.M.S. ORION.
1918
Killed at
ZEEBRUGGE.
23rd April 18

A memorial booklet produced for the ship’s company of HMS *Tiger* commemorating the men who participated in the Zeebrugge Raid. Inside there is a complete list of all those from *Tiger* who volunteered for the operation. (Historic Military Press)

A postcard that commemorates Able Seaman D. Drummond, one of the many killed at Zeebrugge. (Paul Kendall Collection)



Zeebrugge Memoria

EN ROUTE TO
ZEEBRUGGE
ON ST GEORGE'S DAY
1918

H.M.S. "WARWICK," Flagship, Signalling to the Expedition—"ST. GEORGE FOR ENGLAND."

Patrons:

H.M. KING GEORGE. H.M. KING ALBERT.

The official despatch of the Vice-Admiral at Dover, giving the account of the memorable expedition to Zeebrugge on St. George's Day, April 23rd, 1918, has now been published. The British public cannot fail to be deeply stirred by this graphic description of one of the most daring enterprises in Naval History, skilfully planned and magnificently executed by the gallant officers and men of the British Navy.

On the initiative of the City of Bruges and under the auspices of the Anglo-Belgian Union it is proposed to erect a Memorial worthy of so great an achievement. The City of Bruges will share in the cost of the Memorial and will provide a suitable site, within 60 yards of the actual spot where the Blockships H.M.S. "Intrepid" and H.M.S. "Iphigenia" were successfully sunk. Standing on an elevation the Monument will be visible far out to sea.

H.M. KING GEORGE and H.M. KING ALBERT have been pleased to express their cordial approval of the project.

A Competition for the Design will be open to all Architects and Sculptors of British and Belgian nationality, particulars of which are obtainable from the Hon. Secretary. The Competition will be under the direction of a Committee consisting of:—

The people of the United Kingdom will not soon forget the peril to which they were exposed from the German Submarine Campaign, one of the principal bases of which was the Port of Bruges with its outlet at Zeebrugge. The gallantry of the attack by the old Cruiser "Vindictive," and the vessels that co-operated, will always live in history. We appeal confidently to the public to subscribe to the Fund needed for the purpose so that a Monument may be erected on the spot worthy to honour the men and the deed.

Donations may be sent to ALGERNON MAUDSLAY, Esq., C.B.E., Hon. Secretary, Zeebrugge Memorial Fund, 35, Albemarle Street, London, W. 1.

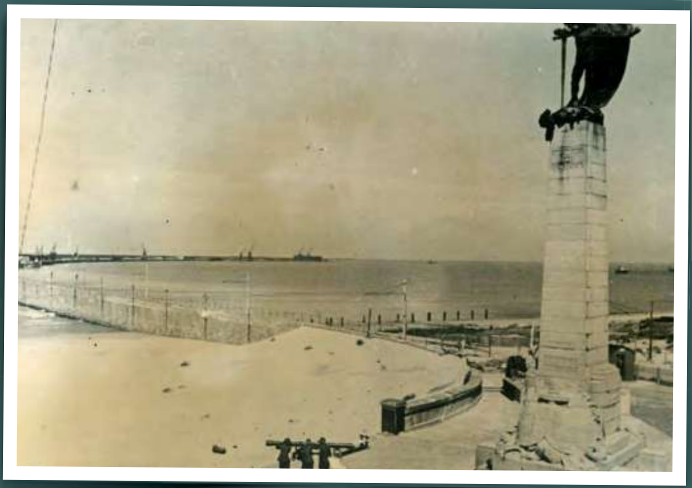
(Signed) HERBERT SAMUEL,
LALAING,
BERESFORD,
WILFRID ASHLEY,
EUGENE STANDAERT,
CECIL HERTSLET,
E. CARTON de WIART,
ALGERNON MAUDSLAY,
DAVIGNON.

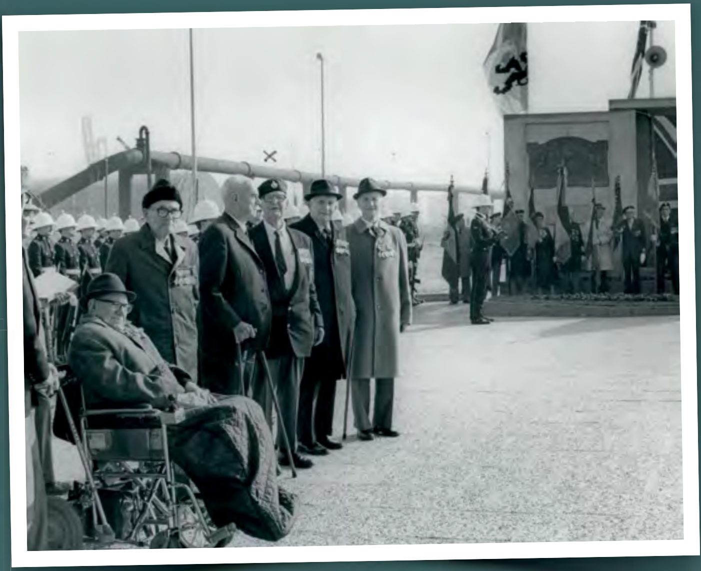
A poster printed during the drive to raise funds for the memorial commemorating the Zeebrugge Raid. (Historic Military Press)

HE DIED FOR FREEDOM AND HONOUR
HARRY RANDALL BENNEWITH

A Great War Death Penny named to a Zeebrugge Raid casualty, Harry Randall Bennewith. Ordinary Seaman Bennewith, who was from Uitenhage, Cape of Good Hope, South Africa, belonged to the fore gun crew on HMS *Vindictive*. Able Seaman George Gooch was also part of the same gun crew as 18-year-old Bennewith: ‘[I] saw him wounded at about 12.30 am on 23rd Apr 18. He was taken from fxal deck to a sheltered position a bench below outside the dressing room and I believe he was killed by a shell that exploded in the dressing room.’ (Paul Kendall Collection)

Dated 26 November 1940, this image shows members of a German Marine-Artillerie (Marine Artillery) unit with a range finder by the base of the Zeebrugge Memorial. By the end of the Second World War, the memorial had been destroyed by the Germans. (Historic Military Press)





The last official veterans’ visit to Zeebrugge was undertaken on the 60th anniversary of the raid. The six veterans present are pictured by the ‘new’ Zeebrugge Memorial. The individual marked by the cross is the youngest of the group, 82-year-old Ernest Tracey. Tracey, a Canadian citizen who flew from Victoria, Vancouver Island, for the ceremony, laid a poppy wreath at the memorial on behalf of the Zeebrugge Association, which, it was noted at the time, was ‘now down to some 25 of its original 1,000 members’. (Paul Kendall Collection)

The Finest Feat of Arms

To what extent the raids upon Zeebrugge and Ostend succeeded in blocking the Bruges Canal remains unclear in the face of conflicting evidence. But there can be no question that the attacks boosted flagging British morale.

When the dust had settled over Zeebrugge harbour, the results of the St George's Day attack could be carefully studied. The two blockships *Intrepid* and *Iphigenia* had certainly come to rest inside the canal entrance, but to what degree they had obstructed the passage of the boats of the Flanders Flotilla remained to be seen.

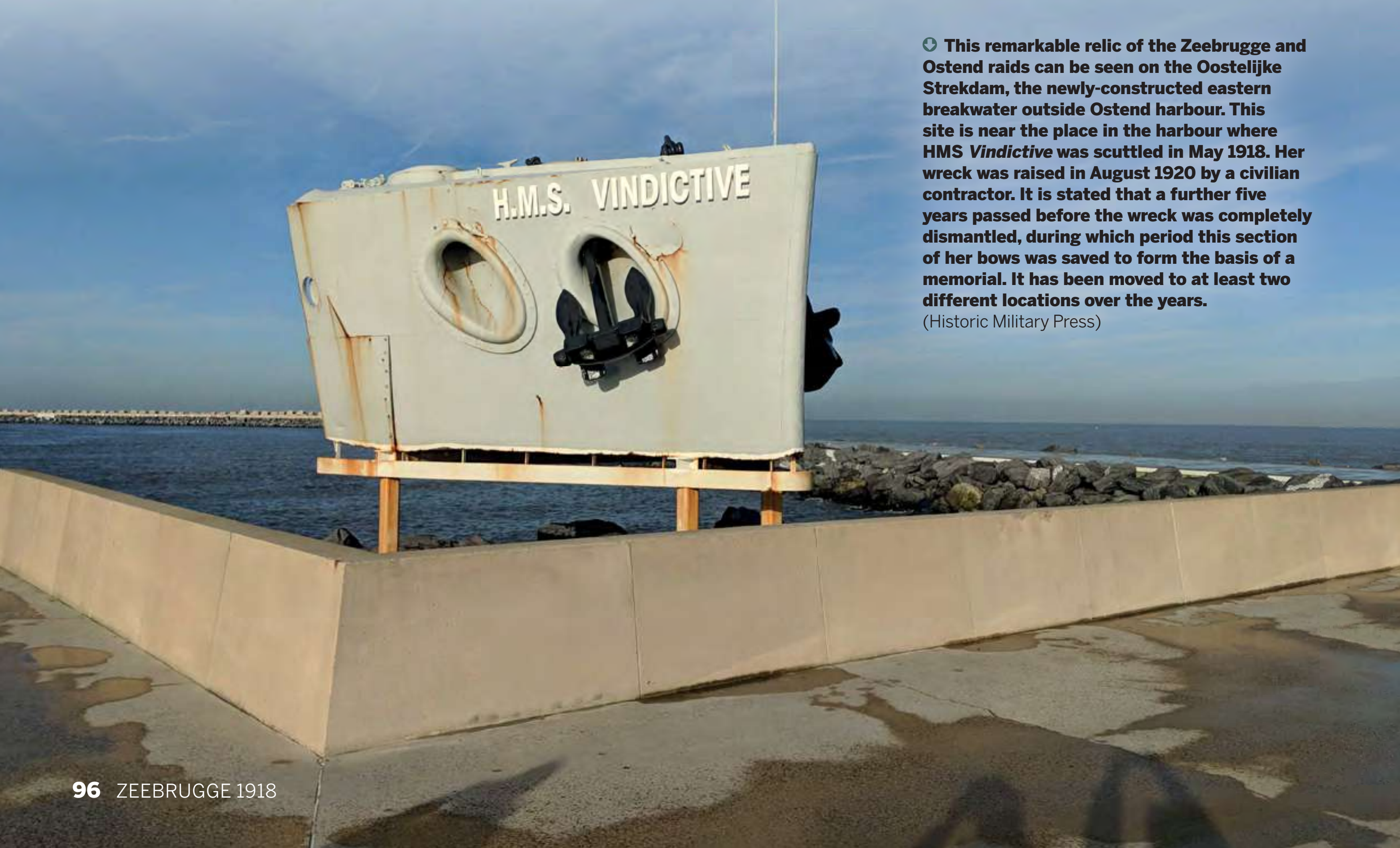
In neutral Holland, the *Amsterdam Standard* reported the following on 27 April: 'The English [*sic*] will not be satisfied with the results obtained, when the first excitement has cooled down and especially when they understand that the entrances to the ports have not been blocked either at Zeebrugge or Ostend. It has been ascertained from the frontier that the German torpedo-boats are leaving and entering unhindered.'

Back in the UK, however, the Press Association declared the raid a success: 'Aerial photographs taken at Zeebrugge during the past few days show that the position is eminently satisfactory. It has been established that none of the German vessels lying in the canal – destroyers, torpedo boats, and submarines – before the raid has been moved. All vessels lying in the Bruges-Ostend canal have their bows in the same direction.

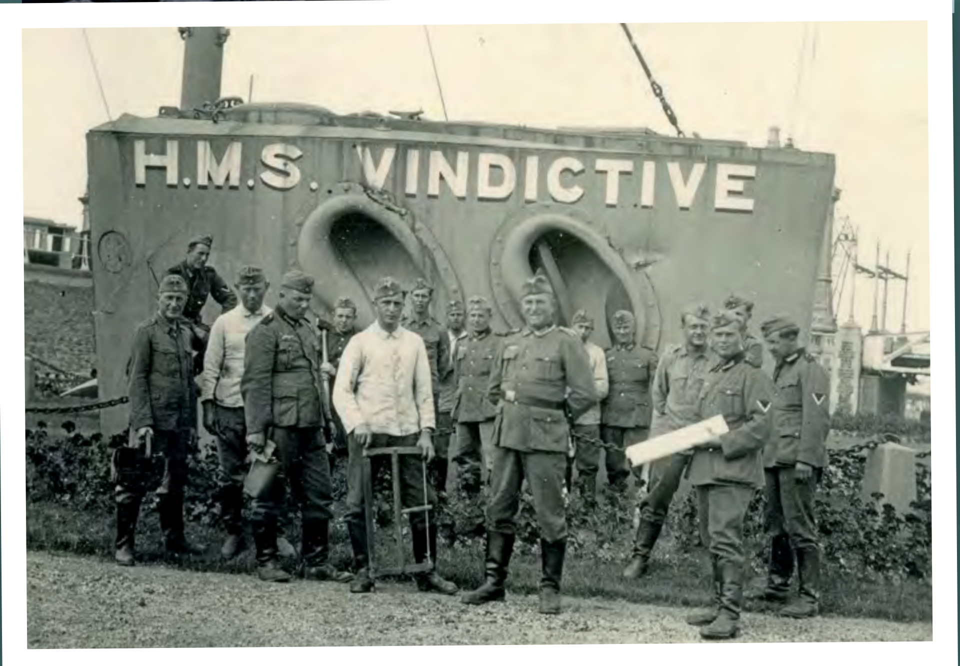
'It would thus seem clear that there is no room to turn the vessels in the canal. There is no accommodation for swinging them at Bruges, and so they have to remain immobile. Another satisfactory feature is that the Germans, being unable to remove the sunken vessels, are trying to cut away some of the piers of the Mole with the object of dredging the channel round the obstructions. The operation is rendered extremely difficult by the fact that the *Thetis*, which is sunk at the entrance to the channel, is throwing up a tremendous amount of silt.'

According to official British sources, the Germans were able to remove two piers along the western bank of the canal near the blockships, as the Press Association's report correctly reported, and dredged a channel through the silt near the sterns of *Intrepid* and *Iphigenia*. This enabled U-boats to pass out into the harbour at high tide. Though this restricted the times at which the boats of the Flanders Flotilla could operate, it was seen that before the raid, two submarines per day left Zeebrugge and this rate was maintained the week after the raid.

Korvettenkapitän Erich Schulze confirmed that U-boats were passing through the canal



This remarkable relic of the Zeebrugge and Ostend raids can be seen on the Oostelijke Strekdam, the newly-constructed eastern breakwater outside Ostend harbour. This site is near the place in the harbour where HMS *Vindictive* was scuttled in May 1918. Her wreck was raised in August 1920 by a civilian contractor. It is stated that a further five years passed before the wreck was completely dismantled, during which period this section of her bows was saved to form the basis of a memorial. It has been moved to at least two different locations over the years.
(Historic Military Press)



The bow section of HMS *Vindictive* surrounded by German personnel in the Second World War. The memorial used to be located near the bridge at the end of the De Smet-De Naeyer Avenue in Ostend, where this image was presumably taken, but since 2014 has been repositioned on the eastern jetty of Ostend Harbour. (Historic Military Press)

entrance at Zeebrugge within days of the raid, although their movement was now being restricted by the tides: 'It is true that for a certain time after the attack the passage by the blockships was impossible except at high tide, but this was of no importance as it sufficed to wait a few hours in order to be able to get in again.

'For about three weeks, until a passage had been dredged beside the blockships the big destroyers had to go to sea by way of the Ostend Canal. In order to make use of this canal its water level had to be raised by means of locks.'

However, in a bid to impede the dredging, on 9 June the monitors *Marshal Soult*, *Terror* and *M.21* bombarded the dredgers and enemy salvage craft attempting to remove the blockships. During the bombardment the canal lock gate was hit and severely damaged. As a result, the rate of sorties by the submarines of the Flanders Flotilla was reduced to one a day, and the larger class of submarines could not pass into the harbour. Equally, though *Vindictive* only partially blocked the canal entrance at Ostend, it created a sufficient obstacle to also prevent the larger destroyers from passing into the sea, at least until the water level had been raised in the canal. So, while the raids are usually considered to have been glorious failures, the operations of the Flanders Flotilla were impeded, though only marginally so, and, ultimately, had a negligible effect upon the war at sea. The effect it had upon Allied morale, on the other hand, was immense.

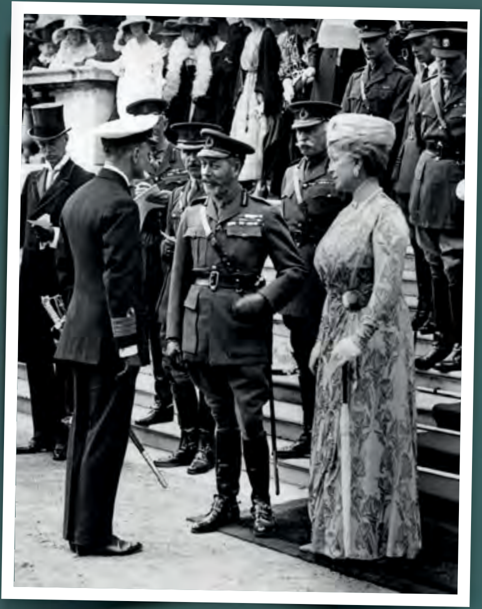
'THE FINEST FEAT OF ARMS'

The raids demonstrated the Royal Navy could attack anywhere, whenever it wanted, regardless of the obstacles or the hazards, and they were heavily promoted as great examples of British courage and enterprise. 'All that was romantic and adventurous in the traditions of the British Navy lived again in the exploits at Zeebrugge and Ostend. It was the rebirth of the spirit of Nelson and Drake,' declared one newspaper.

Keyes was quick to promote the operations as a success, immediately recommending medals for many men without consulting the Admiralty. In particular, he was anxious to reward two badly wounded officers who were not expected to survive their injuries, Sub Lieutenant Maurice Lloyd from *Iphigenia* and Lieutenant Keith Wright from *ML 282*. Lloyd was awarded a Bar to his DSC and Wright a DSC.

Other medals quickly followed. Indeed, it is said that six decorations were awarded for every minute of the fighting. In total, eight Victoria Crosses, twenty-one Distinguished Service Orders, thirty-one Distinguished Service Crosses, sixteen Conspicuous Gallantry Medals and 149 Distinguished Service Medals were awarded to those who had taken part in the Zeebrugge and Ostend raids.

Many of the recipients received their awards from King George V at an open-air investiture at Buckingham Palace on 31 July 1918. The event was reported in the *Liverpool Daily Post*: 'The King held an investiture in the Quadrangle, Buckingham Palace, yesterday, at which he bestowed some 300 Naval, Military and Civil decorations. The public attended in large numbers for the special purpose of witnessing the decoration of six Zeebrugge VCs, some of whom, under Rule 13 of the Royal Warrant, had been selected by their comrades for conspicuous bravery on the occasion of the memorable raid. Great enthusiasm was displayed when the Zeebrugge



One of those awarded the Victoria Cross for his participation in the Zeebrugge and Ostend attacks – in this case decided by ballot – Captain Alfred Carpenter RN pictured being received by King George V and Queen Mary at a garden party for holders of the VC held at Buckingham Palace, July 1920. (Historic Military Press) contingent went forward to receive their VCs, and every man of the party was loudly cheered on mounting the dais and coming to a halt in front of His Majesty.'

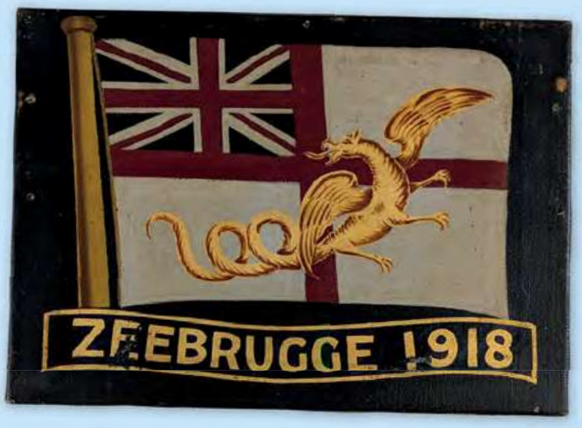
The Zeebrugge attack resulted in 637 men killed, wounded or missing, with a further forty-seven casualties occurring in the first Ostend raid. Just twenty-four Germans were killed. These figures also cast doubt upon the value of the raid, and prompted Captain Herbert Grant, who served as Keyes' Intelligence Officer and was instrumental in acquiring *Iris* and *Daffodil* for the mission, to write a stinging assessment of the operation: 'The massacre of Zeebrugge … for no such folly was ever devised by fools as such an operation as that of Zeebrugge. For what were the bravest of the brave massacred? Was it glory? … for sailors to go on shore and attack forts, which Nelson said no sailor but a lunatic would do, is not only silly … but its murder and it is criminal.'

This bronze floral spray is mounted on the front of the block of the original Mole that can be seen in Admiraal Keyesplein. This spray was presented to Vice-Admiral Roger Keyes by the City of Bruges in 1918. It was returned by his son, Lord Keyes of Zeebrugge and Dover, who unveiled the blocks seen here, as a memorial, on St George's Day, 23 April 1998. (Historic Military Press)

A piece of the original Mole at Zeebrugge which was salvaged during the reconstruction work at the port during the 1980s and 1990s. It was taken from the stretch of the Mole where HMS Vindictive came alongside during the attack on St George's Day, 1918. It can be seen today in Admiraal Keyesplein in Zeebrugge. (Historic Military Press)

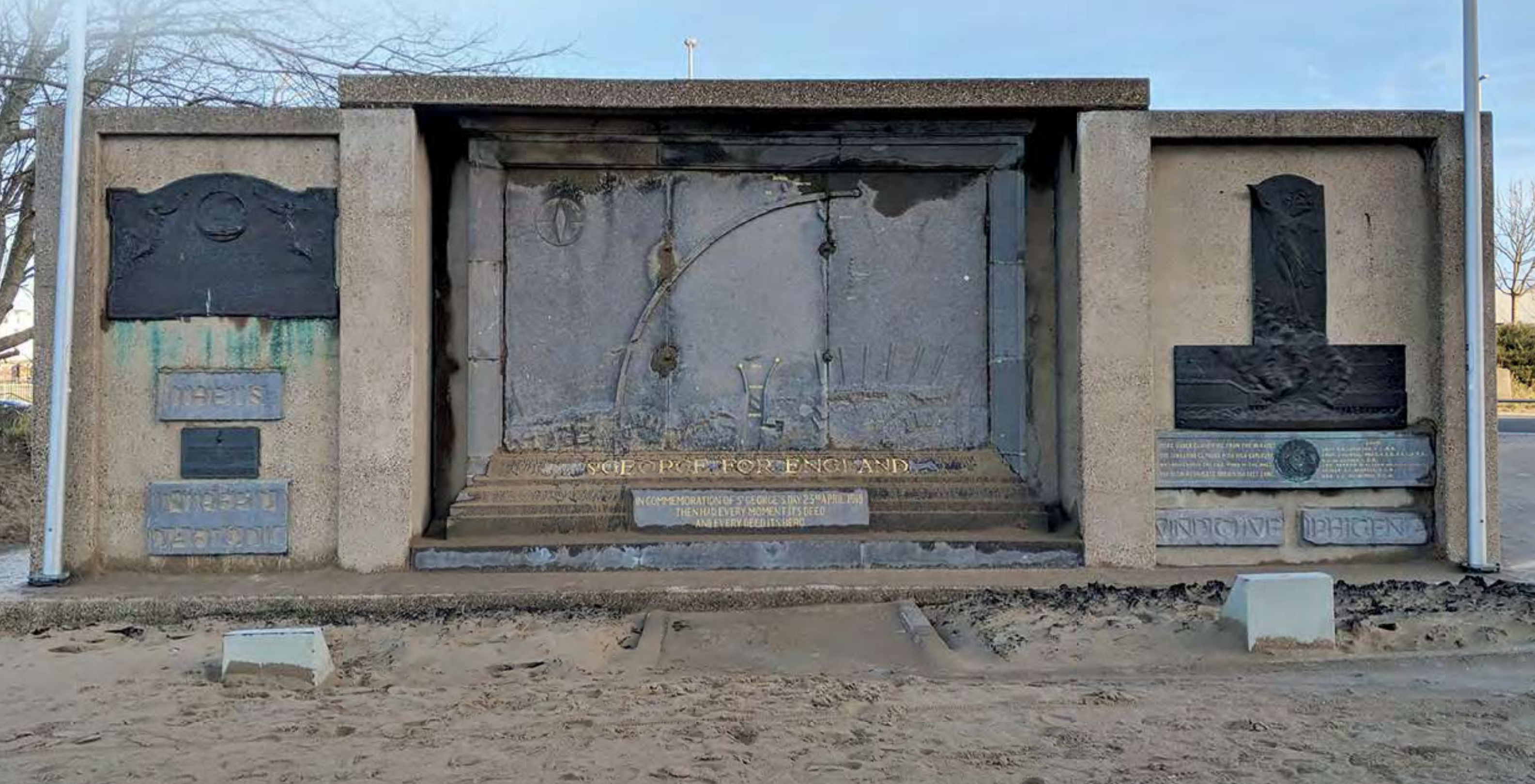
Certainly, many of those who took part in the attack upon Zeebrugge saw it as a failure, such as Captain Arthur Chater and Captain Edward Bamford. 'I discussed the operation with Bamford,' wrote Chater. 'We had failed to gain any of the objectives which had been laid down in our orders. We felt that our part of the operation had been a complete failure. We had lost many good men with what seemed to us no result. We felt extremely despondent.'

Nevertheless, we will grant Winston Churchill, former First Lord of the Admiralty during the early years of the First World War, the last words on the subject: 'It may well rank as the finest feat of arms in the Great War, and certainly as an episode unsurpassed in the history of the Royal Navy. The harbour was initially blocked and was dangerous to U-boats for a period of two months. Although the Germans by strenuous efforts partially cleared the entrance after some weeks for U-boats, no operations of any importance were ever again carried out by the Flanders destroyers.'



This oil on canvas painting is on display in the Police Station located on Marktplein, Zeebrugge. It comprises a White Ensign on which is superimposed a golden dragon with a twisted tail. (Historic Military Press)

The current Zeebrugge Memorial is, in effect, a collection of memorials and plaques (some of which used to be on the old Mole) that replaces the original which was destroyed by the Germans in the Second World War. It can be seen at the top of the beach at the eastern end of Zeedijk. (Historic Military Press)



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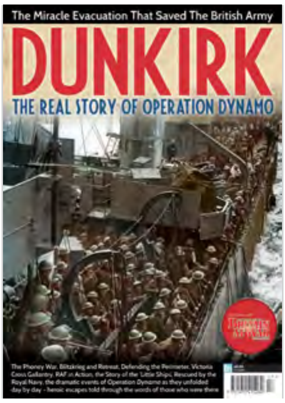
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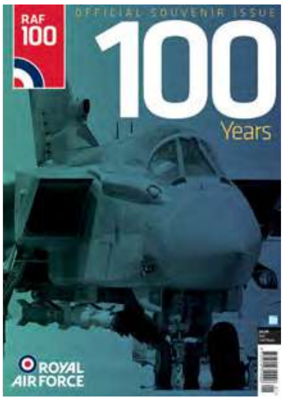
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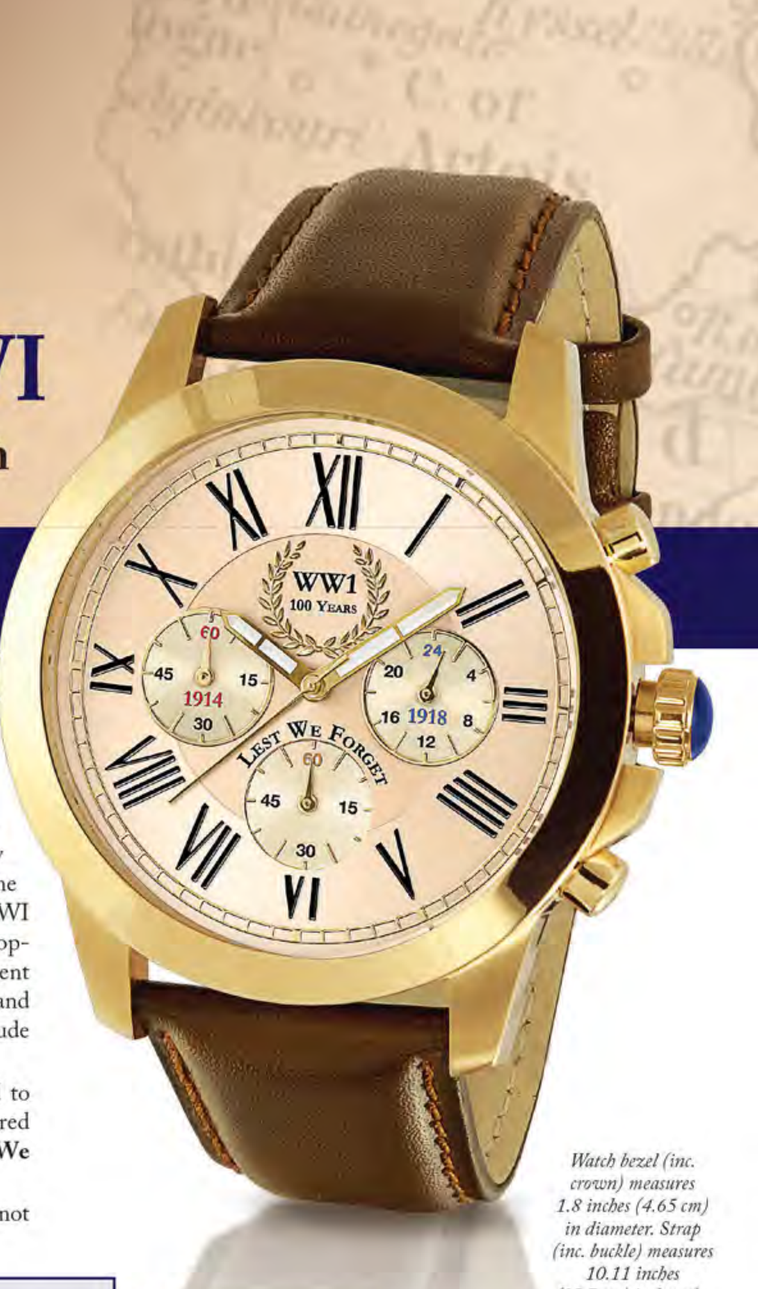

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